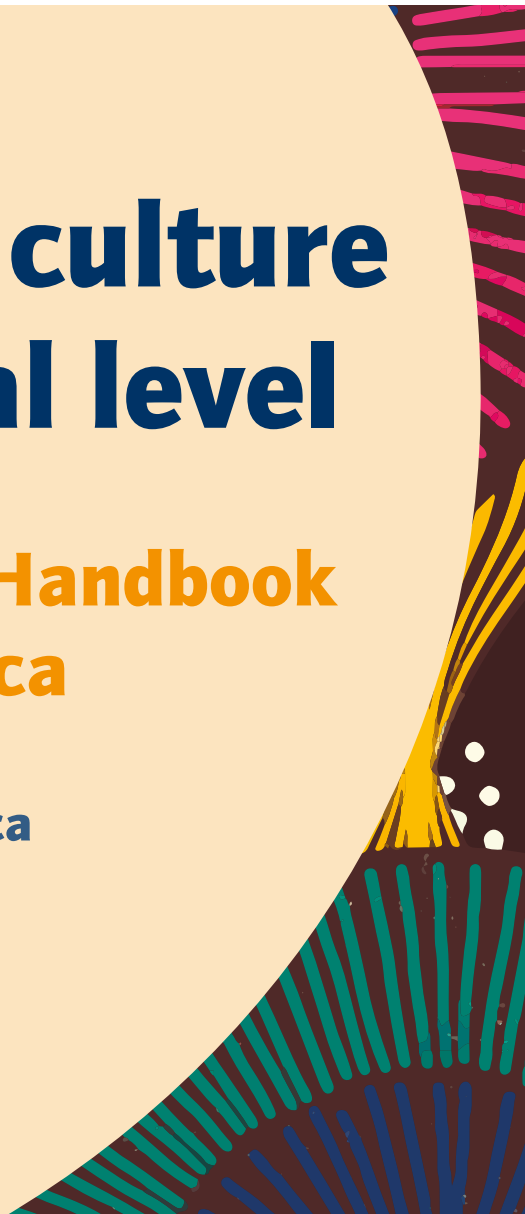




Shaping a quality culture at the institutional level

Internal Quality Assurance Handbook for Higher Education in Africa

UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa





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Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education is a cornerstone of socio-economic transformation. It safeguards the credibility of qualifications, aligns learning with the demands of dynamic labour markets, builds trust to enable academic mobility, and nurtures talents that drive innovation.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 recognizes quality education as a foundation for inclusive growth. Countries have made great strides in establishing multiple frameworks, expanding institutional capacity, and fostering collaboration. Yet differences in resources and approaches highlight the need for sustained efforts to strengthen systems.

UNESCO's Recognition Conventions provide a normative framework for this process. *The Addis Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in African States (2014)* promotes comparability and trust across higher education systems in Africa, while the *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (2019)* extends these principles to the inter-regional level. Together, they create a foundation for mobility and cooperation, reinforced by UNESCO's Operational Strategy for Priority Africa (2022-2029) and the Campus Africa Flagship Programme which focuses on institutional capacity building, recognition of qualifications, and internationalization of higher education.

It is within this context that the UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa (ROSA) launched a series of workshops on quality assurance in Southern Africa. This *Handbook on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa: Shaping a Quality Culture at the Institutional Level* is part of the initiative. The idea emerged during the initial workshop in Zimbabwe (October 2024), where participants called for a practical resource that could extend learning beyond the training space. In response, UNESCO ROSA collaborated with trainers and experts to produce the current Handbook, drawing on both African contexts and continental frameworks.

The Handbook serves as a learning tool and a practical reference. It provides trainers, policymakers, quality assurance professionals, and institutional leaders with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to strengthen institutions, inspire students, and foster trust across systems. By drawing on diverse achievements and shared aspirations within the region, it supports higher education institutions in becoming a catalyst for opportunity, equity, and innovation, equipping graduates to contribute meaningfully to their communities and to the broader progress of the SADC region and the continent.

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Special appreciation goes to the trainers and authors who contributed their time, insights, and expertise to shape the process (alphabetic order by family name):

- **Ms. Miriam Chiyaba**, Former Chief Executive Officer, Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) and former Chairperson, African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN)
- **Mr Fabrice Hénard**, International Quality Assurance Consultant and Former Chief Executive Officer, International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)
- **Dr. Connie Mitchell**, Director of the Teaching and Learning Centre and Director of the Writing and Tutoring Centre, Prince Sultan University, Saudi Arabia
- **Prof. Ana Maria Nhampule**, Vice-Rector, Joaquim Chissano University, Mozambique
- **Ms. Kalawathie (Bella) Sattar**, Project leader for Institutional Quality Management, Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA)

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This Handbook is therefore the outcome of many voices, perspectives, and collaborations, and it is with deep gratitude that we recognize all who contributed to its development.



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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
---------------------	----------

Acknowledgements	5
-------------------------	----------

Disclaimer	6
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Modules:

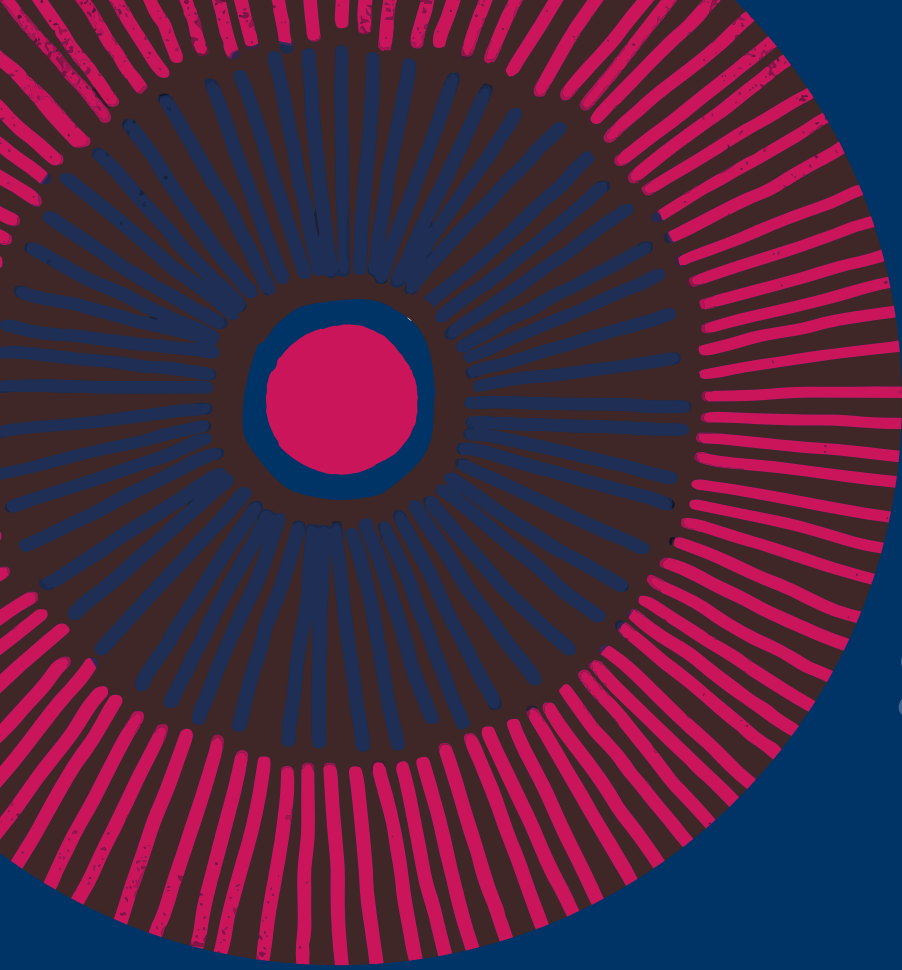
Module 1: Foundations and Contexts of Quality Assurance in Higher Education	8
--	----------

Module 2: Quality Assurance Assessment Methods	41
---	-----------

Module 3: Quality Assurance in Curriculum Design, Development and Evaluation	69
---	-----------

Module 4: Quality Assurance in Digital Transformation	88
--	-----------

Module 5: National, Regional and Continental Quality Assurance Frameworks and Recognition of Qualifications	107
--	------------



Module 1

Foundations and Contexts of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Fabrice Hénard

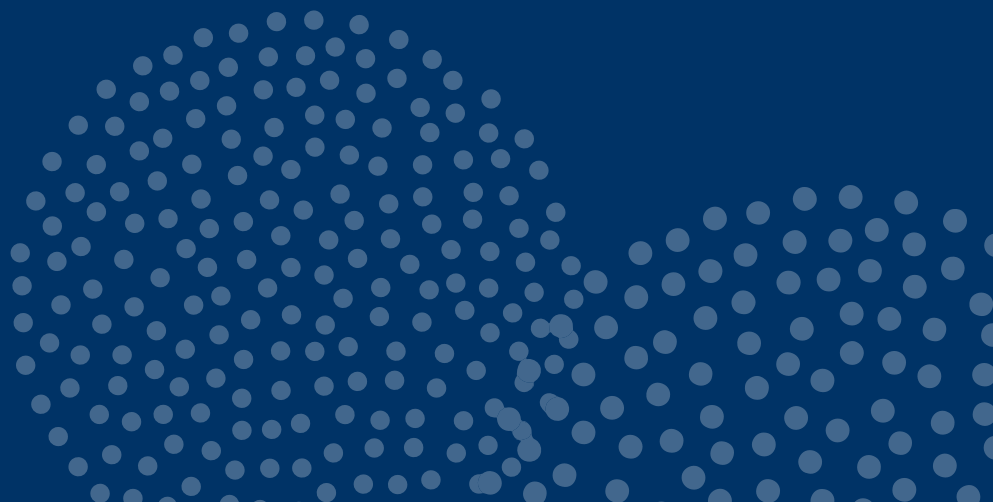
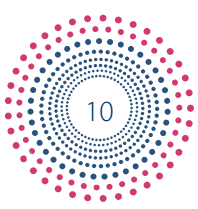


Table of Contents

Acronyms	10
1.1 Introduction	11
1.2 Learning outcomes	11
1.3 Setting the stage for a debate on QA in HE	11
1.3.1 Defining quality: unpacking the value of HE	11
1.3.2 Ways to conceptualise quality	12
1.3.3 Drivers for increased interest in HE quality	15
1.4 Stakeholder engagement	16
1.4.1 Stakeholder engagement: Principles for EQA and IQA	16
1.4.2 Stakeholder engagement: voices and audiences in the quality debate.....	17
1.5 Higher education institutions at the core of QA	18
1.5.1 Shared leadership for quality management	19
1.5.2 Internal and external drivers for QA	19
1.5.3 Subjects and instruments of IQA	20
1.5.4 Structuring internal QA	23
1.6 External quality assurance as a catalyst to quality.....	25
1.6.1 Building common models of EQA	25
1.6.2 Types of instruments in EQA	27
1.6.3 Uniting stakeholders in EQA	29
1.6.4 The importance of communication	29
1.7 Cooperating for mutual recognition and improvement: the advent of regional and global networks of quality assurance providers	30
1.8 Ensuring the quality of the EQA providers.....	32



Acronyms

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
CAMES	The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
DAAD	Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service)
EAQAN	East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network
EAQFHE	East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EQA	External Quality Assurance
HAQAA	Harmonization of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
INQAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
IUCEA	Inter-University Council for East Africa
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
PAQAF	Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework
QA	Quality Assurance
QAF	Quality Assurance Frameworks
RAFANAQ	African Francophone Network of National Quality Assurance Agencies
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAQAN	Southern African Quality Assurance Network
SARUA	Southern African Universities Association
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

1.1 Introduction

This module aims to present the basic concepts of quality assurance (QA) and the rationale behind its development. It seeks to clarify the terminology associated with various approaches to safeguarding and improving quality in higher education (HE). It addresses the value and key policies of quality assurance at both the institutional level (internal QA) and the external level, where an overseeing body is responsible for external QA.

Additionally, this module serves as an introduction to subsequent modules that expand on specific aspects of Module 1, such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA). The module also explores the importance of national quality assurance agencies, authorities or national commissions, being connected to the global QA landscape and undergoing external reviews to ensure the validity and recognition of their QA decisions.

1.2 Learning outcomes

After completing module one, participants should be able to:

- Comprehend the nature of quality in HE and its various dimensions;
- Analyse various drivers behind the development of different approaches to QA;
- Analyse the interests and roles of different stakeholders in QA;
- Comprehend the relevance and applicability of quality management in HE institutions;
- Identify different tools and organizational structures for internal QA;
- Comprehend different approaches and instruments of external QA;
- Explore the value of the external review of QA agencies as well as their connections to the global community of QA.

1.3 Setting the stage for a debate on QA in HE

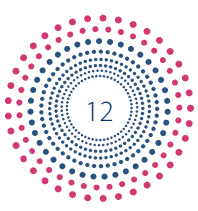
QA is fundamental in HE, ensuring that teaching, learning, and research consistently meet high standards. By setting standards and benchmarks, institutions can identify areas of excellence and those needing improvement, thus fostering transparency and trust. Internally, it encourages reflective practices among educators and administrators and promotes the sharing of good practices, enhancing overall institutional quality.

QA enables institutions to learn from one another through comparison, driving sector-wide improvements. Leaders can use the insights from these processes to make strategic decisions that boost their institutions' performance and reputation, making them more attractive to students and employers alike.

Ultimately, QA creates a culture of continuous improvement, where every member of the academic community works collaboratively to achieve and maintain excellence. This dynamic process ensures that HE institutions remain responsive and adaptive to the changing needs of society and the global market.

1.3.1 Defining quality: unpacking the value of HE

Quality in HE is a complex and evolving concept that cannot be captured by a single definition. Nega Kahsay (2012) highlights that experts describe it in various ways: some see it as elusive and difficult to pin down, while others emphasise its relative nature, shaped by expectations, values, and institutional goals. Quality is also viewed as dynamic, constantly adapting to changes in education and society. Rather than being a fixed standard, quality in HE is an ongoing process, shaped by the needs of stakeholders and the ever-changing educational landscape.



Defining quality in HE therefore remains a complex task, since 'quality' is inherently multi-dimensional and not objective, meaning that no single definition can capture its full scope. Different stakeholders, including students, faculty, employers, and regulatory bodies, often hold varying views on what quality means, leading to conflicting priorities and expectations. Traditional metrics and standardized approaches may fail to encompass the diversity of teaching methods, research outputs, and student experiences that together form the educational landscape.

Cultural, institutional, and disciplinary differences further complicate the issue, as what works well in one context may not be appropriate in another. These variations call for a flexible, context-sensitive approach to QA that can adapt to local needs while still maintaining robust standards. Continuous dialogue among all parties involved is essential to refine and update quality criteria over time. Institutions must also engage in reflective practice, using multiple evaluation frameworks and evidence-based strategies to assess their performance comprehensively.

Ultimately, recognising the fluid nature of quality allows for a more inclusive and dynamic QA system. This approach not only supports improvements in teaching, learning, and research but also helps to build trust among all stakeholders by ensuring that quality measures are both relevant and responsive to change.

A dual approach towards defining quality

Two main approaches for defining quality in HE can be found in literature (Schindler et al., 2015). The first is to adopt a broad definition that centres on a key goal or outcome, such as fulfilling a stated mission or vision. This approach is often standards-driven, emphasising the need to meet predetermined standards, specifications, or requirements, and sometimes even to exceed them in the pursuit of excellence. In contrast, the second approach is stakeholder-driven, focusing on accountability and the delivery of a transformative learning experience that benefits students and employers (Beerens, 2017).

While the standards-driven approach relies on measurable criteria and benchmarks, the stakeholder-driven approach seeks to capture the diverse expectations of those directly involved in or affected by HE. Both approaches offer valuable insights: the former provides clarity through defined metrics, and the latter ensures that quality reflects the needs of the broader community. Together, they highlight the complexity of quality and the importance of a multifaceted approach in QA.

1.3.2 Ways to conceptualise quality

Conceptualizing quality in HE is a complex task, as it encompasses multiple dimensions and perspectives. Rather than having a single, rigid definition, it turns out that quality may rather be interpreted through various conceptual lenses that reflect diverse expectations and priorities. As a result, it is not a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept but rather a fluid and context-dependent construct.

To address this complexity, Harvey and Green (1993) proposed five distinct ways of thinking about quality instead of providing a single definition. Their typology has since become a widely referenced framework in HE literature and among practitioners, offering a structured approach to understanding and evaluating quality in different academic contexts.

Quality	Viewpoint
Quality as exceptional	Sees quality as something special, rare, and difficult to achieve. It aligns with the idea of academic excellence, where only the highest-performing students and institutions meet the required standards. Higher education institutions (HEIs) following this approach often have highly selective admissions, aiming to attract the best students and maintain their reputation for excellence. Faculty members and academic staff often support this view, as it upholds rigorous academic achievements.
Quality as perfection	Focuses on delivering sound and consistent outcomes, with an emphasis on well-defined processes. This perspective is inspired by principles like 'zero defects' and 'getting it right the first time.' While this works well in industries that rely on standardization, it is less practical in HE. Unlike factories producing identical products, HEIs focus on developing diverse and unique individuals, making it unrealistic to expect 'defect-free' graduates.
Quality as fitness for purpose	Defines quality by how well an institution meets its goals and serves its intended purpose. It emphasizes alignment with institutional missions and responsiveness to students' needs. However, a common critique is that simply meeting a stated purpose is not sufficient; there should also be a discussion on whether the purpose itself is meaningful and relevant. This perspective is particularly important for external stakeholders such as policymakers and employers, who assess whether education fulfils broader economic and social objectives.
Quality as value for money	Views quality in terms of efficiency, accountability, and maximizing the return on investment. It considers how resources, such as funding, faculty time, and infrastructure, are used to achieve the best possible outcomes. A typical example would be efforts to increase graduation rates while keeping costs low. This perspective is especially relevant for governments, university administrators, parents, and students who want to ensure that education is a worthwhile investment.
Quality as transformation	Focuses on education as a process of meaningful change. It emphasizes how learning shapes students' intellectual, professional, and personal growth. Instead of simply measuring academic performance or financial efficiency, this perspective highlights how education empowers students and contributes to personal and societal development. Some argue that in an era of mass HE, this should be the primary way to assess quality, rather than relying solely on traditional measures like prestige or cost-effectiveness.

Table 1: Five viewpoints for quality (Source: Harvey and Green, 1993)

By considering these different perspectives, institutions and policymakers can develop a more balanced and comprehensive approach to quality in HE. Each perspective brings insights, and the most effective evaluation of quality often involves integrating multiple viewpoints rather than relying on a single definition.

Quality in HE is increasingly being viewed as part of an institution's culture rather than just a set of standards or regulations. Nega Kahsay (2012) illustrates the above mentioned five concepts and additionally highlights this perspective, emphasizing that quality is deeply embedded in how an organization operates and evolves over time. It is not merely about meeting benchmarks but about fostering a shared commitment to excellence across all levels of the institution.

This idea of quality as culture is built on two key elements. First, there is the psychological aspect, which includes shared values, beliefs, and expectations about maintaining and improving quality. When faculty, staff, and students collectively prioritize quality, it becomes a natural part of daily operations rather than an external requirement. Second, there is a structural or managerial aspect, which involves setting up clear processes and coordinated efforts to ensure quality improvement is systematic and sustainable (European University Association, 2006).

Quality culture is less about strict systems and more about the people who bring it to life. It thrives when individuals take ownership of quality in their daily work, embracing a mindset of continuous improvement rather than just following formal policies. However, as Karakhanyan and Stensaker (2021) highlighted, quality culture is not one-size-fits-all: it is shaped by an institution's unique history, mission, and environment. What works for one HEI may not work for another, making it crucial to develop a tailored approach that aligns with the institution's specific needs and context.

Schindler et al. (2015) developed a conceptual model of quality that demonstrates how different perspectives and strategies come together to define and assess quality in HE. Their model highlights the need for a balanced approach that combines a broad strategy for establishing overall goals and outcomes with a specific strategy for identifying concrete indicators to measure whether those goals have been achieved. A key aspect of the model is the recognition that stakeholder perspectives play a crucial role in shaping both the definition of quality and the methods used to assess it, as different groups may have varying expectations.

At the heart of the model is the idea that quality should be understood in multiple ways. One important aspect of this is ensuring that education aligns with the institution's mission and broader objectives. Another focuses on the transformative nature of learning, emphasising personal and intellectual growth. A further dimension stresses the importance of maintaining high standards and striving for excellence, while another highlights the need for accountability, ensuring that resources are used effectively and that institutions meet the expectations of students, educators, and society.

To support these broad conceptualizations, the model also includes specific indicators that help assess whether institutions are meeting these quality dimensions. By linking the broader understanding of quality to measurable factors, the model provides a structured way for institutions to evaluate their performance and identify areas for improvement.



Figure 1: Conceptual model of quality in higher education (Source: Schindler, Welzant, Puls-Elvidge and Crawford, 2015)

Self-reflection exercise

Consider the higher education institution you are associated with or one you know well. Choose one or more of the four quality dimensions and identify the key stakeholders involved. Think about the sources of information and indicators that could help illustrate the chosen dimension(s).

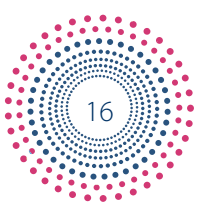
1.3.3 Drivers for increased interest in HE quality

Quality has long been an implicit concern of HEIs, dating back to the mediaeval institutions, which operated as autonomous, self-governing academic communities. It was seen as a natural and self-evident aspect of university-level learning, upheld by the professional responsibility of the academic community. HEIs, as centres of research and scientific inquiry, were entrusted with upholding academic excellence. As they expanded their missions to encompass new disciplines, serve broader and more diverse student populations, and contribute to national and global development goals, the value and effectiveness of HEIs have come under increasing evaluation. Today various external and internal pressures make QA a central issue in HE governance.

The following table outlines key drivers shaping the growing focus on quality in HE, along with their characteristics.

Driver	Characteristic
Internationalization and cross-border co-operation	Growing student mobility and cross-border HE underscore the need for reliable QA based on shared standards. Broader regional integration efforts in Africa, exemplified by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), reflect increasing regional cooperation. Initiatives like the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the East African Higher Education Area and the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) aim to promote student mobility and harmonize accreditation and quality assurance standards across borders.
Massification and rising enrolment	The shift from elite to more accessible, inclusive education, has led to increased student enrolment, rising public expenditures, and mounting financial pressures, making QA more essential than ever.
Diversification of Higher Education	The expansion of HE has led to diverse institutions, including research-intensive, teaching-focused, and discipline-specific establishments, with various delivery modes.
National development goals	QA is directly linked to national priorities such as poverty reduction, youth development, and regional progress.
Autonomy and governance	Institutions value their autonomy, often tied to management practices that promote leadership, competition, efficiency, and effectiveness.
Accountability to society and the labour market	HE contributes to society and the economy through teaching, research, and community engagement, requiring credibility and high-quality standards to maintain public trust. This has led to increased competition and need for enhanced efficiency.
Accountability to students	Students expect degrees that provide relevant knowledge and practical skills for careers. With diverse backgrounds and expectations, they value flexibility and personalized learning.

Table 2: Key drivers and characteristics shaping the growing focus on quality in higher education



In practice, these factors are deeply interconnected and often influence one another: global and continental trends have a significant impact on the governance structures of HEIs in individual countries. The process of massification, for example, not only results in an increase in student numbers but also leads to greater diversity in the range of courses offered, tailored to meet the social and economic demands of society. However, HEIs themselves are in the best position to define their own profiles and shape their teaching and research in a way that aligns with their distinctive missions and goals.

At the same time, HEIs are confronted with a student body that has a wide range of needs, spanning cultural, social, and academic backgrounds. While these driving forces are closely intertwined, it is crucial that they are considered separately when developing QA systems and measures. By doing so, it becomes possible to create tailored approaches that are not only relevant to the specific context of a country and its HE system but also gain the necessary acceptance and deliver tangible results.

Self-reflection exercise

Consider the state of higher education and existing quality assurance mechanisms in your country. What key factors have influenced past and current developments? What changes and advancements do you foresee in the future?

1.4 Stakeholder engagement

Engaging stakeholders is essential to building a robust and inclusive QA ecosystem in HE. Both external quality assurance (EQA) and internal quality assurance (IQA) processes benefit from the diverse insights and expectations brought by a broad spectrum of actors. Effective engagement relies on clear principles, such as transparent selection, meaningful participation in review and governance structures, and tailored communication, that foster mutual trust and shared ownership. As outlined in sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2, involving voices from within and outside HEIs enriches the quality dialogue but also introduces complexity. Balancing these varied perspectives (academic, professional, institutional, and societal) is key to ensuring that QA remains relevant, credible, and responsive to evolving educational and labour market needs.

1.4.1 Stakeholder engagement: Principles for EQA and IQA

When involving stakeholders in EQA and IQA, agencies and institutions may consider the following principles (Bollaert et al., 2020):

- Transparent selection processes ensure that individuals, ranging from students and employers to faculty and alumni, are chosen based on nominations (in case of students) and demonstrated expertise, with targeted training programmes enhancing their ability to contribute substantively.
- Once engaged, these stakeholders are integrated into external review panels where their insights are valued equally, ensuring a holistic appraisal of institutional and programme quality.
- Their roles are further expanded as they participate in advisory and decision-making bodies, thereby influencing policy and strategic direction while preserving the agency's independence.
- Continuous, open dialogue is maintained through regular meetings, advisory councils, and digital platforms, which also cultivate a shared sense of ownership over the quality assurance process.
- Communication strategies are carefully tailored to the needs of different groups, avoiding technical jargon, and ensuring that all stakeholders remain well-informed and actively engaged.

1.4.2 Stakeholder engagement: voices and audiences in the quality debate

Higher education quality is shaped by a diverse range of voices, each bringing unique perspectives and expectations. Stakeholders, those who participate in, influence, or evaluate HE, play a critical role in defining and maintaining quality, both in EQA and IQA processes, including peer review. However, these varying perspectives can sometimes lead to misunderstanding or conflict, fuelling ongoing debates about how, when and why different stakeholders should be engaged.

Stakeholders include both internal and external actors. Internally, university leadership, academic staff, students, and administrative personnel all contribute to shaping the institutional quality culture. Externally, QA agencies, government bodies, employers, professional bodies, alumni, parents, prospective students, and the public influence and assess quality in HE. Each of these groups brings specific interests: while academics and professional bodies may focus on pedagogical improvement, employers often emphasise market relevance, and students increasingly highlight preparedness for the labour market.

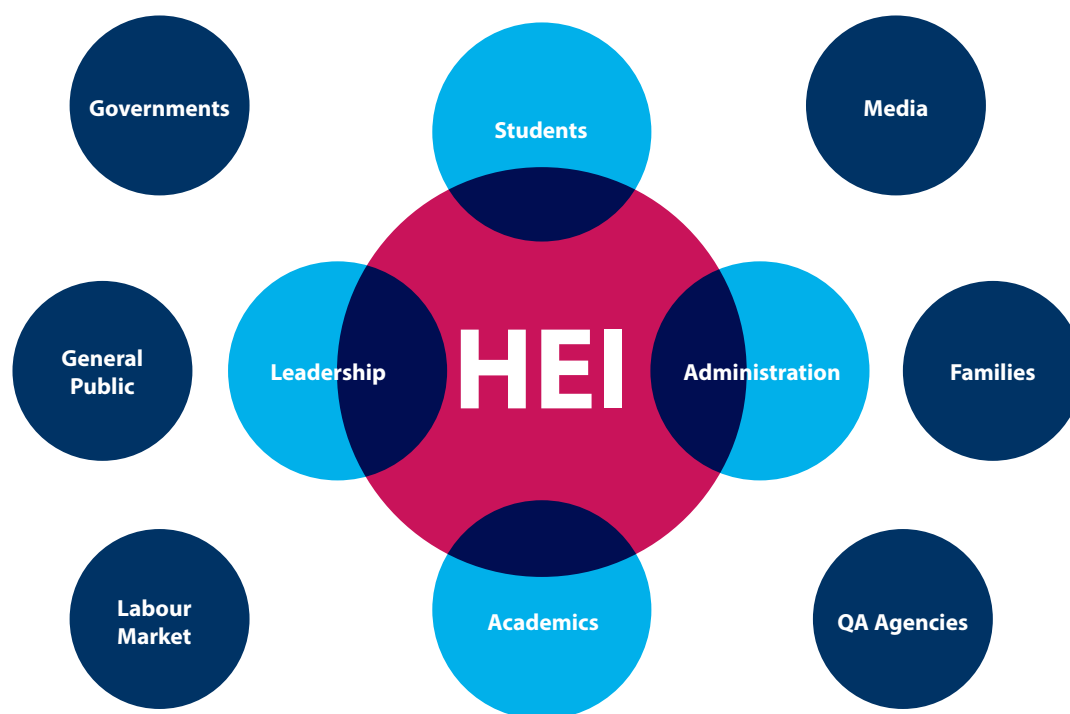
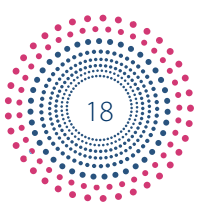


Figure 2: Stakeholder mapping in internal quality assurance in higher education institutions

Some authors categorise the stakeholders in HE into four main groups that are essential for defining quality (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). These groups include: 1) Providers (such as funding bodies, the community, and taxpayers); 2) Users of products (like students); 3) Users of outputs (for instance, employers); and 4) Employees in the sector (including academics and administrators).

Langrafe et al. (2020) found that HEIs create more value by building strong relationships with stakeholders. Sharing information helps HEIs align with stakeholders' needs, while involving faculty and administrators in decision-making enhances engagement. Mutual trust strengthens cooperation, and including stakeholders in strategic planning boosts institutional success, though students were not central to this process. Value creation is reciprocal, HEIs benefit when they provide value to stakeholders, as stakeholders contribute back. Effective stakeholder management helps HEIs attract top faculty and students, improve research, and enhance their reputation. Prioritizing stakeholder engagement gives HEIs a competitive advantage and increases their positive impact on society.



Despite diverse expectations of different stakeholder groups in higher education QA, their engagement can enrich the system and align expectations, though it may also necessitate clarifying the system's limits. The case of Estonia (Beerkens and Udam, 2017) reveals varied perspectives: employers prioritize quality control and market relevance, rectors and academic staff advocate for internal improvement and constructive feedback, while government representatives focus on policy guidance and resource optimization. Students emphasize labour market preparedness and credible education. Despite these differences, all groups agree on the importance of meeting educational standards and the role of QA in providing essential information. Incorporating diverse stakeholders may enhance the system but could also lead to conflicts, requiring careful policy analysis.

Academic staff, students, and HE administration primarily define quality as continuous improvement, emphasizing its dynamic nature and adaptability to changing needs and trends over time. This reflects the ongoing efforts required to meet the evolving demands of the educational environment. Other significant definitions of quality include satisfaction of stakeholders and the culture of excellence, which are crucial for maintaining high standards. Lower-ranked definitions include involvement of employees and quality as exceptional. Additionally, there is a noted necessity for upgrading, updating, and aligning with societal and international standards to ensure continuous relevance and competitiveness (Iradel, 2018).

Communication also plays a pivotal role in effective stakeholder engagement. Robust QA systems depend on transparent and accessible communication strategies that avoid technical jargon and are tailored to the specific needs of diverse stakeholder groups. Institutions must not only disseminate outcomes but also clearly articulate the methodologies used in quality assessments, how these assessments inform institutional improvement, and the mechanisms in place to safeguard the independence and integrity of the QA process. Digital platforms, including institutional websites and data dashboards, can help disseminate QA information to both internal and external audiences, fostering trust, accountability, and ongoing engagement with quality processes.

Self-reflection exercise

Reflect on the higher education institution you are involved with or one you are familiar with. Identify the key stakeholders and their primary interests. Examine any areas where their interests align or conflict. Consider potential approaches to bring these diverse interest groups together and encourage collaboration.

1.5 Higher education institutions at the core of QA

Implementing IQA means that institutions assume responsibility for ensuring and enhancing the quality of their offerings across all areas of operation, including curriculum design, teaching and learning, research activities, and community engagement. This process requires the development of an effective QA system tailored to each institution's specific context (Gover and Loukkola, 2018).

Because learning and research are inherently personal and context-dependent, institutions must adopt flexible approaches that align with their unique missions and challenges, recognizing that QA is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single standard. Moreover, QA processes play a critical role in promoting transparency and informing stakeholders about HE, with a variety of tools.

HEIs generally enjoy considerable autonomy in continuously refining their internal quality policies and procedures, while external frameworks and accreditation processes serve as valuable references and support in this ongoing effort.

1.5.1 Shared leadership for quality management

The concept of 'quality management' summarises this comprehensive responsibility. As noted by Harvey (2004–25), quality management is a 'dynamic process that employs policies and systems, used by an institution to maintain and enhance the quality of education experienced by its students and of the research undertaken by its staff'. This dynamic nature underscores a commitment to continuous improvement, where regular assessment, stakeholder engagement, and systematic refinement ensure that all academic, research, administrative, and social functions meet established standards and promote excellence.

A UNESCO survey (Martin and Parikh, 2017) reveals that a large majority of HEIs worldwide have a formal quality policy (82%) or include one in their strategic planning (76%). While quality remains a priority for top management, its importance is less evident at lower levels, with only 46% of institutions reporting decentralized policies at the faculty or department level. Moreover, a regional perspective indicates that African institutions have significant catching up to do, as two out of three HEIs are still in the process of developing a quality policy.

Leadership in teaching and learning is increasingly seen as a shared responsibility rather than one held solely by a single leader. Successful quality management depends on the collective efforts of staff and students working together to enhance teaching. Good leadership in this area involves making decisions based on data and evidence, ensuring that teaching innovations align with the institution's policies and strategic goals, and supporting staff through continuous professional development. Establishing dedicated learning and teaching centres can also help to foster a culture of quality.

Self-reflection exercise

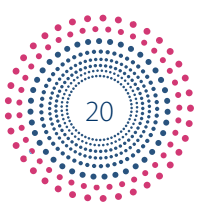
Select your own higher education institution, or any other institution you are familiar with, as an example. Reflect on how the pursuit of quality is expressed in the institution's mission statement and/or strategic goals. What key terms or phrases are used to convey a commitment to quality? Consider how these expressions reflect the institution's values and objectives.

1.5.2 Internal and external drivers for QA

QA in higher education originated in the United States in the early 20th century, before being introduced in Japan in the 1930s, and subsequently adopted in various other countries in the aftermath of World War II. QA implementation at the institutional level was initially slow to develop but gained momentum, especially across Europe, following the adoption of external standards (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). In many cases, HEIs introduced IQA measures in response to external agency requirements. Institutional responses were shaped not only by organizational characteristics but also by national political and policy choices. These influences can determine whether QA is seen as a supportive mechanism that enhances institutional performance or as merely an additional bureaucratic burden.

Kivistö and Pekkola (2017) suggest that IQA can be categorized into three types: primary, secondary, and latent QA processes. Primary QA focuses on core functions, such as teaching, research, and third mission activities. Secondary QA is more limited in scope, addressing the quality of specific institutional activities. Latent QA, though not explicitly recognized as QA, includes processes that indirectly influence institutional quality, such as staff recruitment, promotion policies, and internal oversight of administrative and legal matters. These latent processes play a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing overall institutional effectiveness.

For most HEIs, quality management serves both internal and external purposes, ensuring continuous improvement and accountability. According to the aforementioned UNESCO survey (Martin and Parikh, 2017), nearly all institutions



view quality management as essential for enhancing academic activities (94%), reinforcing its role in improving teaching, research, and student learning experiences. Quality management fosters a culture of self-reflection and continuous development, supporting institutional learning. Additionally, although to a lesser extent, equitable resource allocation remains a significant aspect, promoting fairness and efficiency in distributing funding, infrastructure, and support services.

For nine out of ten HEIs, quality management has a role in focusing on compliance with external standards and accountability to government and society.

In terms of thematic areas quality management efforts primarily focus on teaching and learning (96%), underscoring the commitment to academic excellence. Research assessment is also a key priority, albeit to a slightly lesser extent. Other important aspects include graduate employability and international cooperation. However, the survey indicates that quality management still places relatively little emphasis on community outreach and income generation, particularly in North America.

QA in research exhibits diverse patterns across HEIs, reflecting variations in institutional profiles, resource availability, and research intensity. In research-intensive universities, competitive funding is often secured through national and international agencies, with proposals undergoing rigorous evaluation by both external and internal peer review panels. Success in obtaining grants and high research productivity is a key driver for academic career advancement, reinforcing a performance-oriented culture.

In recent years, a growing number of HEIs have adopted comprehensive research policies and robust quality management processes to guide strategic decision-making and optimize resource allocation. These frameworks integrate quantitative metrics, such as publication counts, citation indices, and patent registrations, with qualitative assessments like internal reviews and impact evaluations. For example, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK combines measures of research outputs, impact, and the research environment to provide a multi-dimensional picture of research quality. In parallel, QA agencies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education in the UK, have developed standards and guidelines that support continuous improvement and alignment with international benchmarks.

Self-reflection exercise

Think about how external standards, such as national accreditation requirements, have influenced quality assurance practices at your institution or one you are familiar with.

Can you provide a specific example where external requirements led to significant improvements or changes in internal quality assurance processes?

1.5.3 Subjects and instruments of IQA

QA of teaching and learning within HEIs (Martin and Parikh, 2017) focuses on enhancing and ensuring academic standards through a range of processes and tools. Central to these efforts are student course evaluations and satisfaction surveys. Regular monitoring of student assessments is another significant practice. While the establishment of institution-wide standards for student assessments is quite common, regular monitoring by external examiners is less frequently practiced. This suggests a reliance on internal mechanisms and perhaps a need for increased external oversight to ensure robustness in assessment practices.

Self-reflection exercise

How familiar are you with the QA tools and sources mentioned in the list, and which ones have been the most valuable to you?

Provide specific examples of how they have contributed to improving QA practices at your institution.

Could you identify some QA tools specifically related to teaching and learning and their implementation and impacts?

According to the UNESCO survey (Martin and Parikh, 2017), a significant majority of institutions offering doctoral programmes have established quality management processes to monitor them. Similarly, many institutions providing distance or blended learning have integrated quality measures to ensure oversight.

The quality of academic staff performance is monitored using various tools, with student evaluations playing a dominant role. Internal evaluations for promotion decisions are also common. Innovative approaches, such as peer reviews and mentorship programmes, remain relatively limited in use but are steadily gaining traction.

Furthermore, HEIs emphasize the evaluation of student support structures, recognizing their critical role in the overall educational experience. This especially applies to libraries and IT facilities which are commonly evaluated.

These findings largely match with a survey among European HEIs (European University Association, 2023). While the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) focus on learning and teaching, institutions generally take a comprehensive approach to QA, ensuring all activities are included to some extent. National QA agencies serve as the primary source of guidance for IQA, with increasing reliance on their regulations (88% of institutions use national QA guidelines for learning and teaching, compared to 65% in 2010). Research is now covered by IQA in 95% of cases, a significant increase from 2010. Service to society is also increasingly incorporated into QA (90% of institutions covering it to some extent, up from 48% in 2010).

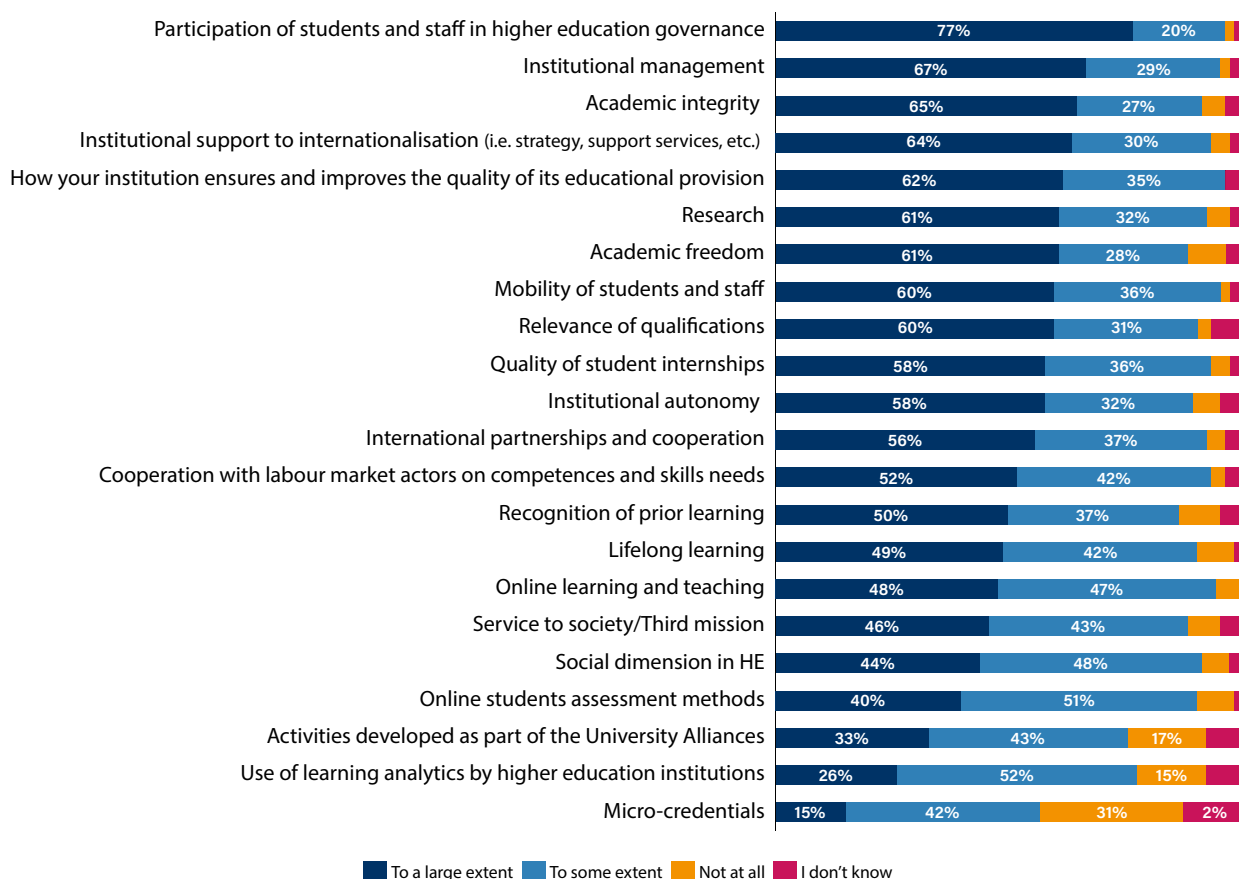


Figure 3: Areas covered by IQA (Source: European University Association, 2023)



QA for digital HE shares many similarities with traditional forms of HE, but it also incorporates specific features tailored to the digital landscape. Digital HE has gained significant relevance, particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. HEIs globally have expanded online, hybrid, and blended learning models to increase accessibility and flexibility (OECD, 2022). Technological advancements, including AI-driven learning platforms and micro-credentials, are reshaping HE.

Countries have started integrating digital education QA frameworks, which emphasize equity, student-centred learning, and digital competencies. This shift reflects a broader recognition of digital education as a core component of HE strategies.

In response to this growing importance, HEIs are adopting new monitoring mechanisms. The use of digital learning analytics is increasing, enabling real-time tracking of student progress and feedback. Institutions are also enhancing student and faculty engagement in QA processes through regular surveys. Furthermore, QA agencies are playing a pivotal role in supporting HEIs by providing best practice guidelines, offering training for QA staff, and conducting thematic reviews of digital education implementation.

Institutions generally adhere to national QA agency guidelines while also taking into account developments within their respective sectors. In addition, some institutions apply alternative QA frameworks tailored to specific areas. One such framework is the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, a continuous improvement model that helps organizations systematically plan changes, implement them, monitor results, and adjust accordingly. In the context of HE, PDCA is often used to enhance internal QA processes, such as curriculum development, teaching evaluation, and administrative efficiency. Other frameworks, like ISO 9001 and ethical research guidelines, are also employed to support quality management in specialized domains.

Discussing the focus of QA in higher education also involves examining whether a distinction is made between administrative and academic areas. Traditionally, HEIs consist of two distinct groups: academics and administrators. Although recent studies suggest that the boundaries between these roles are becoming increasingly blurred, Kivistö and Pekkola (2017) argue that maintaining this distinction remains important. This is particularly relevant in QA processes, where roles are often clearly delineated. Legal frameworks, recruitment practices, and remuneration standards further reinforce this distinction, with academics primarily engaged in teaching and research, while administrators manage institutional operations.

The UNESCO survey (Martin and Parikh, 2017) underscores the diverse approaches and varying degrees of implementation across different regions. For instance, institutions in Asia and the Pacific regions show a higher prevalence of certain quality management practices, such as the establishment of quality handbooks. In contrast, North American institutions report less frequent feedback to students about survey results, although they demonstrate a better integration of quality data into decision-making processes.

In African HEIs, while there is significant use of course evaluations and student satisfaction surveys, the approach diverges from global patterns, as student evaluation of teaching is less common, occurring in about two-thirds of African institutions. Furthermore, African institutions are less likely to use student workload assessments and graduate tracer studies, marking a divergence from broader practices. Additionally, a higher proportion of African HEIs reported being in the early stages of developing institutional quality policies, indicating that the formalization of quality management processes is still in progress.

Self-reflection exercise

Create a list of key areas of action at a higher education institution you are familiar with. Reflect on how these areas are addressed through internal QA mechanisms.

Has the significance of specific instruments increased or decreased over time?

Consider how these changes might influence the institution's overall approach to quality management.

1.5.4 Structuring internal QA

Two surveys (Martin and Parikh, 2017, and EUA, 2023) provide a comprehensive view of IQA structures in HE. They show that IQA is widely implemented to ensure compliance with national standards, support institutional goals, and enhance educational quality.

Institutions adopt varied approaches to structuring IQA policies. A few HE institutions use a dedicated QA document, many incorporate QA into multiple policy documents, and some embed QA elements within broader institutional policies.

Typically, rectors, vice-chancellors, or equivalent top management oversee QA processes, often supported by dedicated QA units at the institutional level. Although centralized QA units are common, faculty or departmental QA structures are less frequent and usually lack specialized staff. Traditional QA structures, such as collegial bodies and quality committees, remain essential, with most institutions appointing a dedicated individual responsible for QA.

Stakeholder involvement mirrors this centralization. Academic and administrative staff, along with students, through course evaluations and participation in decision-making bodies, are actively engaged in QA processes. However, external stakeholders, such as industry representatives and employers, are less consistently involved.

Data-driven approaches, including surveys and benchmarking tools, are widely used to monitor performance and inform decision-making, although challenges persist in converting data into effective improvements.

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, a similar trend is evident, with IQA responsibilities largely concentrated at the leadership level. According to the State of Play of IQA in the SADC (2023), the quality assurance function is typically situated within a dedicated QA unit or office, but the success of IQA is closely tied to the support and involvement of senior institutional leaders. While there are efforts to promote distributed responsibility across academic and administrative levels, decentralized QA structures, such as faculty- or department-level units, are still less common, and academic staff involvement remains uneven.

Structural approaches to IQA

Gover and Loukkola (2018) illustrate the way HEIs have developed diverse IQA structures tailored to their specific needs: the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium implemented a three-tiered review system at programme, faculty, and university levels. Each level engages stakeholders, compiles reports, and integrates feedback into the next stage, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation. Similarly, the Vienna University of Economics and Business in Austria conducts programme evaluation workshops every four years, bringing together students, alumni, employers, and faculty to discuss improvements and shape a four-year action plan.

Portalegre Polytechnic in Portugal incorporates employers at multiple stages of its QA system, using discussion forums for curriculum planning, engaging them in programme evaluations, and assessing graduate performance through employer surveys. In Scotland, the organization Sparqs actively fosters student engagement in QA processes by providing training and institutional support.



Common tools for IQA used across institutions include cyclical programme reviews, thematic evaluations, student progression analysis, and external accreditation procedures.

Research Findings on Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) at the University of the Free State

The University of the Free State (UFS), established in 1904, is a prominent public institution in South Africa, with approximately 39,701 students and 3184 academic staff.

The research highlights varying perceptions of quality among university stakeholders, with graduate employability being a key attribute of quality for most students and staff, except in the humanities. Despite the presence of institutional quality documents, awareness of these materials was generally low, particularly among administrative staff. Academic staff found quality policies more useful than their administrative counterparts, though knowledge of the university's quality manual was limited across both groups.

Regarding IQA instruments, academic and administrative staff engaged most frequently with individual target agreements. Administrative staff perceived these agreements as particularly beneficial in terms of feedback, usage, and effectiveness. Academic staff identified self-evaluation at the university level and course evaluations at the faculty level as the most impactful IQA instruments. Overall, IQA was seen to positively influence teaching, learning, and management, though its effects on employability were considered limited. Course evaluations were noted to significantly enhance teaching performance, while self-evaluation improved programme coherence and content coverage.

Management-related IQA instruments, such as unit performance agreements and performance monitoring, had the greatest influence on institutional operations, decision-making, and strategic planning. However, student engagement surveys were viewed as having less impact on teaching and learning. Resource allocation and participatory management were positively affected by IQA processes, though the lower impact on employability was attributed to South Africa's relatively low graduate unemployment rate and differing faculty approaches. Some academic staff noted curriculum review as a positive factor in employability, alongside employment fairs and labour market interactions in specific faculties.

External regulatory bodies and professional councils played a crucial role in shaping the university's IQA system, sometimes limiting staff ownership of quality assurance processes. Leadership support emerged as a key internal factor in IQA effectiveness, particularly through institutional support structures like the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and the Directorate of Institutional Research and Academic Planning (DIRAP). However, leadership support at faculty and departmental levels was perceived as weaker. Encouraging faculty participation through financial incentives and human resources was suggested to enhance IQA engagement.

The university's IQA system was primarily driven by compliance with external standards and a focus on improvement. While staff recognized the benefits of IQA, they also reported a high workload. Academic staff responses indicated mixed evaluations of IQA's effectiveness, with some questioning whether procedures were genuinely evidence-based.

Source: Excerpt from Lange, L. and Kriel, L. 2017. *Integrating internal quality assurance at a time of transformation: University of the Free State, South Africa*. UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning. Available at: <https://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/publication/integrating-internal-quality-assurance-time-transformation-university-free-state-south-africa> (Accessed on 1 March 2025.)

1.6 External quality assurance as a catalyst to quality

The EQA in HE represents a fundamental shift in how academic quality is monitored, evaluated, and enhanced. Over recent decades, rapid expansion and diversification in HE, driven by global market forces and changing public expectations, have underscored the need for robust quality assurance mechanisms that go beyond traditional internal controls (Martin and Stella, 2007).

At its core, EQA emerged across the world in response to a convergence of challenges.

- HE systems grew in size and complexity, with institutions increasingly relying on private funding and operating in competitive, market-oriented environments. The limitations of internal quality control became evident.
- Traditional approaches, which often focused on inputs such as research resources or bureaucratic oversight, were no longer sufficient to guarantee that teaching and learning processes met evolving standards. Instead, external bodies were needed to offer an independent evaluation of academic programmes and institutional performance, ensuring that quality was not just presumed but demonstrably maintained.
- The advent of 'new public management' has redefined the role of the state, shifting from direct control to a model where the government sets broad guidelines and holds institutions accountable through performance indicators. This reorientation has made periodic, externally conducted reviews a critical part of the HE policy framework. By establishing independent QA agencies, governments have sought to balance institutional autonomy with the need for public oversight, a combination that fosters both innovation and accountability.
- Governments, funding agencies, employers, and students alike require transparent, evidence-based assessments of educational quality. As public resources become scarcer and HE increasingly seen as an investment in human capital, stakeholders expect institutions to demonstrate not only compliance with minimum standards but also continual improvement in teaching, learning, and overall outcomes. In this context, EQA serves a dual purpose: it acts as a safeguard against substandard provision and as a catalyst for quality enhancement by promoting systematic self-evaluation and peer review.

1.6.1 Building common models of EQA

Over the past decades, EQA has undergone significant evolution. Uvalić-Trumbić and Martin (2022) describe a 'global quality assurance model' that effectively balances the three essential objectives of quality control, accountability, and improvement. Contemporary QA systems have evolved to integrate several key mechanisms, which are further described in Module 4. These include:

- Self-assessment
- External evaluation
- Accreditation mechanisms

This shift not only strengthened institutional autonomy but also introduced systematic external oversight to ensure credibility and trust in HE systems.

International and regional collaboration has played a crucial role in shaping a shared approach to quality assurance. The Bologna Process in Europe and the establishment of international networks such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) have facilitated the exchange of good practices and the alignment of standards across countries. These initiatives have contributed to the emergence of a common set of principles, such as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) and evaluation criteria, allowing for comparability of qualifications and facilitating cross-border student and staff mobility.

Harvey (2024) describes the following four main approaches:

- Accreditation ensures that HEIs and their programmes meet established quality standards. It involves a formal certification by an authorized body, confirming compliance with specific criteria. There are two main types:
 - Institutional accreditation refers to an entire institution, including its administration, resources, and all programmes offered.
 - Programme accreditation focuses on individual study programmes, assessing whether they meet academic standards for a specific discipline.
- Audit refers to a quality audit rather than a financial one. It verifies that institutions have proper procedures in place to maintain quality, integrity, and standards in education.
- Assessment is a broad term for evaluating the quality of institutions, programmes, qualifications or specific components. It measures inputs, processes, and sometimes outcomes to determine performance levels.
- Standards checking or standards monitoring, is the process of evaluating students' achievements and abilities, as well as an institution's performance and conduct. This includes external examinations to assess academic achievement or professional competence, along with the use of performance indicators and student evaluations of services provided.

Approach		accreditation	audit	assessment	standards checking
Purpose	accountability				
	control				
	compliance				
	improvement				

Figure 4: Purposes and approaches to QA (Source: Harvey, 2024)

It is important to recognize that both the terminology and approach to QA are context-specific, shaped by the institutional environment and prevailing quality culture in which they are applied.

Self-reflection exercise

Reflect on how well the four approaches can (or could) achieve their intended purposes in your country or another country you are familiar with.

Consider whether these approaches have evolved over time and, if so, how this development has shaped their ability to meet their purposes.

1.6.2 Types of instruments in EQA

While a European survey (Cirlan and Gover, 2024) highlights that most Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) conduct mandatory evaluations at both institutional and programme levels, often incorporating cluster assessments in line with national legislation, African parallels can be drawn from the SADC region. Research by Hoosen et al. (2018) as well as a German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst/DAAD) report (2023) shows that SADC countries predominantly use a combination of accreditation and audits, with quality assurance occurring at both institutional and programmatic levels. For example, countries like Mauritius and Zambia apply differentiated QA approaches depending on the type of institution or programme, demonstrating that multi-level evaluation models are also well established in the region.

In some HE systems, institutions have the flexibility to choose whether their EQA is conducted at the institutional or programme level. In other cases, the approach is predetermined, such as when private HEIs undergo programme or programme-cluster evaluations, while public institutions follow different requirements.

In addition to mandatory quality assurance, several agencies offer voluntary external evaluations. This can allow HEIs to select an agency for additional assessments beyond their required evaluations, or it may involve agencies providing specialized EQA to meet specific needs. For example, some agencies conduct subject-specific programme evaluations to ensure a more in-depth review of particular academic disciplines. These voluntary evaluations offer institutions the opportunity to further enhance their quality assurance processes beyond the standard regulatory requirements.

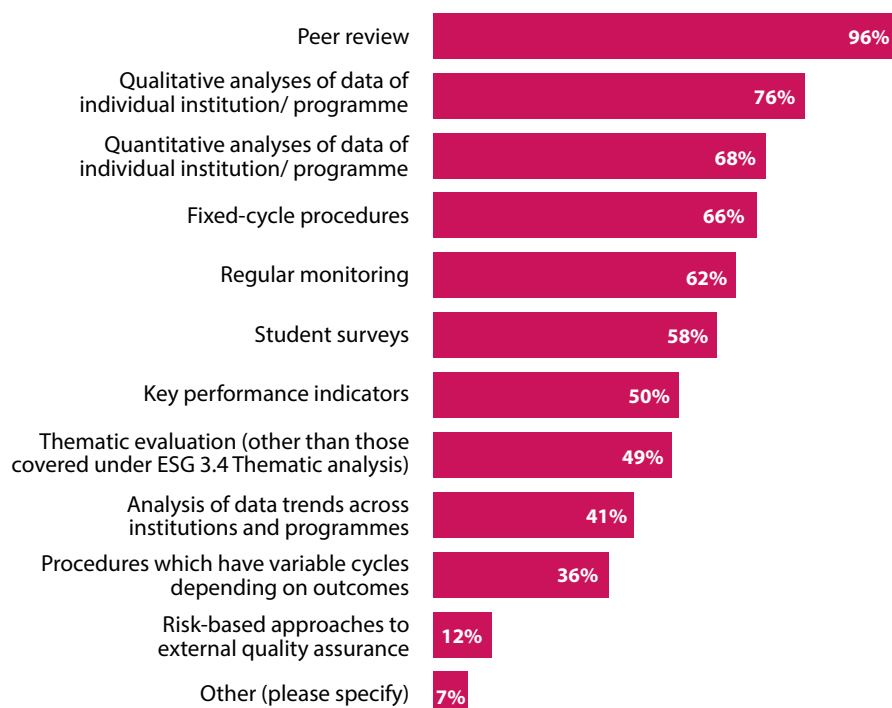
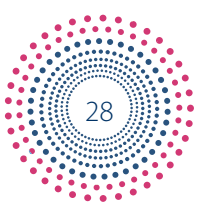


Figure 5: Instruments/tools and approaches used in QA activities (Source: Cirlan and Gover, 2024)

The most common methods used by QA agencies include peer review, qualitative and quantitative data analysis, and fixed cycle procedures. The majority of agencies employ a combination of at least three of these methods, which align with the main tools for external quality assurance outlined in the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA). While the ASG provides a framework, agencies retain flexibility in their application, such as the ESG in the European Higher Education Area. Additionally, some agencies are influenced by international frameworks, with the World Federation for Medical Education standards being the most frequently mentioned. Other frameworks include those from the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the



Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior, and subject-specific standards for disciplines such as engineering and business education. European tools and guidelines for research assessment were also referenced by some agencies.

Balancing regulatory requirements with flexibility is key to making quality assurance a driver of institutional growth (Gover and Loukkola, 2018). Excessive bureaucracy can reduce QA to a compliance exercise, limiting its potential for meaningful improvement. When administrative demands overshadow engagement, the relevant stakeholders may feel disconnected from the process. This rigidity can hinder innovation and prevent quality assurance from adapting to evolving educational needs and developments.

Risk-based approaches are emerging as a tool in QA, though their use remains limited (Cirlan and Gover, 2024). A small number of agencies have reported implementing risk-based methods. In some cases, these approaches trigger external reviews outside the standard evaluation cycle when specific concerns arise that require further investigation. Many agencies rely on data monitoring to identify potential risks, while some also consider complaints from stakeholders, such as students and staff, as triggers for additional evaluations. Although not all agencies explicitly classify stakeholder complaints as part of a risk-based approach, they may still serve a similar function within institutional evaluation processes.

One of the key justifications for risk-based QA is to reduce the evaluation burden and optimize resource allocation. A related approach, used by about a quarter of responding agencies, involves variable evaluation cycles based on assessment outcomes. This method allows for adjustments in the timing and scope of follow-up procedures, as well as the length of accreditation validity, depending on the institution's or programme's performance. Such flexible evaluation models contribute to more efficient and targeted quality assurance processes.

Cross-border HE is expanding globally, offering students diverse learning opportunities and encouraging international collaboration. However, ensuring consistent quality across borders is challenging and essential to protect students and maintain trust in international degrees. Many countries have developed accreditation systems and regulatory frameworks, with some even engaging in international networks to align QA practices (Vincent-Lancrin, Fisher and Pfothner, 2015).

The landscape of EQA in HE has undergone significant transformation across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). With the establishment of new QA agencies, the variety and sophistication of quality assessment instruments have increased. The 50 EQAR¹-registered agencies now employ over 300 different procedures, ranging from single programme evaluations to institutional audits (Szabó, 2023).

Most EHEA countries have adopted a mixed approach, incorporating both institutional and programme-level EQA. Even in systems where programme-level accreditation is predominant, institutional reviews are often conducted to streamline further accreditation processes and to instil a quality culture. In countries like Finland and Turkey, where institutional QA is the main requirement, HEIs voluntarily engage in programme-level QA to enhance international recognition.

Additionally, QA agencies have expanded their activities beyond traditional ESG-based evaluations, venturing into continuing education, thematic assessments, and consultancy services. However, this diversification raises concerns about potential conflicts of interest if QA processes and consultancy activities are not clearly separated.

Between 2015 and 2022, three-quarters of EQAR-registered agencies modified their QA approaches, reflecting broader developments in HE. Many countries are shifting towards clustered evaluations, assessing groups of programmes rather than conducting repetitive individual reviews. This method has been adopted in countries like Croatia, Latvia, France, and Estonia, improving efficiency while maintaining rigorous quality standards.

¹ European Higher Education Area's official register of quality assurance agencies.

These recent trends focus on maintaining impact through innovative approaches and addressing 'evaluation fatigue.' The shift to online assessments during the pandemic has led to hybrid QA methods. Moving from control-focused to enhancement-led QA emphasizes internal systems' effectiveness. Additionally, involving international experts has made QA more global, with translated results for broader access.

Ideally, legal frameworks incorporate key provisions that establish the basic structure of a QA system by defining the types of accreditations, outlining the consequences of EQA processes, and determining the status of QA agencies. These frameworks must also include robust safeguards to ensure the independence of QA agencies, such as clear rules for the nomination of governing bodies, dismissal procedures, and mechanisms for self-governance. Additionally, legal and regulatory instruments should refrain from embedding overly detailed procedural or methodological requirements, which could make the systems too rigid and inflexible.

1.6.3 Uniting stakeholders in EQA

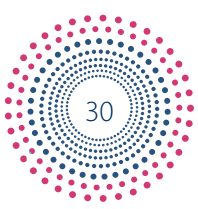
When involving stakeholders in EQA, agencies may consider the following principles (Bollaert et al., 2020):

- Transparent selection processes ensure that individuals, ranging from students and employers to faculty and alumni, are chosen based on both nominations and demonstrated expertise, with targeted training programmes enhancing their ability to contribute substantively.
- Once engaged, these stakeholders are integrated into external review panels where their insights are valued equally, ensuring a holistic appraisal of institutional and programme quality.
- Their roles are further expanded as they participate in advisory and decision-making bodies, thereby influencing policy and strategic direction while preserving the agency's independence.
- Continuous, open dialogue is maintained through regular meetings, advisory councils, and digital platforms, which also cultivate a shared sense of ownership over the QA process.
- Communication strategies are carefully tailored to the needs of different groups, avoiding technical jargon and ensuring that all stakeholders remain well-informed and actively engaged.

1.6.4 The importance of communication

Effective communication about QA in HE is essential for ensuring transparency, trust, and informed decision-making among stakeholders (Gover and Loukola, 2018). Institutions should clearly articulate the purpose, processes, and outcomes of their quality assurance efforts to demonstrate accountability and continuous improvement. One key challenge lies in making QA reports accessible and comprehensible to diverse audiences, including students, employers, policymakers, and the general public. Public reports should be structured in a way that balances comprehensiveness with clarity, avoiding overly technical language that may hinder understanding.

Digital platforms, including institutional websites and databases, offer valuable opportunities for enhancing accessibility and engagement with quality-related information. However, the effectiveness of communication also depends on internal dissemination, fostering a culture where faculty and staff actively participate in QA processes. Institutions should not only share outcomes but also provide insights into how they assess and improve their programmes, reinforcing their commitment to excellence. By developing clear and targeted communication strategies, HEIs can enhance public confidence and support continuous quality enhancement in a meaningful and transparent manner.

**Self-reflection exercise**

Reflect on the various aspects of external quality assurance. How would you define the role of the external quality assurance system in your country?

What are its distinctive features?

In your view, what improvements would be most appropriate to serve the various missions of external quality assurance?

Who are the key stakeholders in external quality assurance?

1.7 Cooperating for mutual recognition and improvement: the advent of regional and global networks of quality assurance providers

The international expansion of QA began with the first accreditation initiatives, which emerged in the late 19th century in the United States (CRS, 2024). This accreditation process subsequently extended to Japan in 1930, followed by the Philippines and the United Kingdom in the 1960s. In 1991, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in HE (INQAAHE) was established, initially bringing together eight agencies. Today, this network comprises nearly 310 members across all continents.

Over the past two decades, QA in higher education across Africa has undergone significant transformation, evolving from fragmented national systems to more structured, coordinated regional frameworks. This shift has been driven by the growing demand for quality, relevance, and comparability in HE systems across the continent. Sub-regional networks have played a key role in this evolution. Notably, the East African Community (EAC) established the East African Higher Education Area (EAHEA) in 2017, supported by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). This initiative promotes harmonized QA standards, mutual recognition of qualifications, and regional mobility of students and academic staff. It also introduced the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE), further aligning educational outcomes across member states. Similar efforts are observed in other regions, such as the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES) in West and Central Africa. These initiatives collectively contribute to the broader continental vision of an African Common Higher Education Area, aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The QA networks have proven indispensable for agencies, as they facilitate the exchange of experiences, research on QA, and the resolution of issues related to quality assessment methodologies. At the same time, agencies have deemed it necessary to reflect on general principles, such as the independence of their decisions from political influence and the degree of collaboration with HEIs (Karakhanyan, 2020). They have also considered ways to enhance their effectiveness (Biaggi et al., 2023).

With the acceleration of the globalisation of HE, characterised by student and academic staff mobility, joint programmes, the development of overseas campuses, the rise of online education, and instruction in English, the issue of programme quality assessment and recognition has taken on a new dimension. This phenomenon has prompted discussions on the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, particularly in the late 1990s, in regions that have established common HE areas, such as the European Higher Education Area (Wysocka, 2022) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Higher Education area in Southeast Asia, as indicated in the ASEAN Road Map for Higher Education Space 2025 (ASEAN, 2022). As a consequence, QA agencies have collaborated with various stakeholders, including governments, HE rectors' conferences, and students, to develop mechanisms ensuring the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. This has facilitated the recognition of degrees and, consequently, graduate mobility. Simultaneously, agencies have deliberated on safeguarding against political and ideological influences, seeking to uphold their integrity in assessing the quality of programmes and HEIs.

The internationalisation of HE has also led to the QA system to accommodate the specificities of cross-border education that need to be evaluated. This has posed numerous challenges for national QA agencies, which have had to develop appropriate methods to assess the quality of these programmes and institutions operating in different countries. Networks have played a pivotal role in establishing these methods (Biaggi et al., 2023).

Concurrently, national agencies started to assess the quality of programmes and HEIs beyond their borders, opening the expansion of international QA. Some agencies have gained significant international recognition and reputation that has positively impacted the recognition and standing of their respective HE systems. Moreover, this international QA has generated revenue for agencies often subject to fluctuations in government funding, prompting many to engage in international accreditation to diversify their financial sources (ENQA, 2024).

Networks of agencies have played a crucial role in implementing this mutual recognition, an issue that is both technical and political, as it pertains to state prerogatives, which often include responsibility for the quality of delivered programmes. Globally, the knowledge economy has heightened the significance of HE quality, drawing the attention of international organizations such as UNESCO, which has been engaged on this matter for over 30 years, as well as HE harmonization initiatives in Europe, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Below is an overview of key quality assurance networks, grouped by region, along with their respective dates of establishment (Hénard, 2020).

Panorama of networks in quality assurance

Global

- International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE): Established in 1991, INQAAHE serves as a global network supporting quality assurance agencies worldwide.

Asia-Pacific

- Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN): Founded in 2003, APQN enhances QA in higher education across the Asia-Pacific region.
- ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN): Created in 2008, AQAN fosters collaboration in quality assurance among ASEAN member states.
- ASEAN-QA: A collaborative initiative focusing on capacity building for quality assurance within ASEAN countries.

Africa

- African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN): Established in 2009, AfriQAN promotes cooperation among quality assurance agencies across Africa.
- East African Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN): Established in 2012, a network dedicated to strengthening quality assurance in East Africa.
- Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN): Established in 2016, supports quality assurance initiatives in Southern Africa.
- Réseau Africain Francophone des Agences Nationales d'Assurance Qualité (RAFANAQ): Established in 2020, a francophone African network enhancing QA in higher education.

**Arab States**

- Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE): Established in 2007, ANQAHE facilitates collaboration among Arab quality assurance agencies.
- Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World (AQAAIW/IQA): Established in 2011, aims to stimulate and improve the quality of HE in the Islamic world.

Europe and North America

- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA): Established in 2000, ENQA is a leading organization that supports quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). ENQA is one of the 4 European key stakeholders responsible for the implementation of the EHEA area, primarily in QA.
- Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA): Established in 2001, CEENQA connects quality assurance agencies in Central and Eastern Europe.
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA): Established in 1996, CHEA is a prominent organization overseeing accreditation in the United States.
- CHEA Global International Quality Group (CGIQ): An international initiative under CHEA aimed at fostering global collaboration in quality assurance.

Latin America and the Caribbean

- Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE): Established in 2004, is the regional network advancing quality assurance in Caribbean higher education.
- Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES): Established in 2003, RIACES promotes cooperation among quality assurance agencies in Ibero-America.
- Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES): Established in 2018, promotes quality assurance in higher education and cooperation between the respective national systems of evaluation and accreditation of higher education in Latin America.

Source: Hénard, 2025.

1.8 Ensuring the quality of the EQA providers

In this context, networks of QA agencies have published guidelines and principles.

Quality Assurance for EQA authorities in Africa

Part C of the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) establishes foundational principles and operational benchmarks for the quality assurance of external quality assurance (EQA) bodies themselves. It underscores the need for EQA agencies to function with integrity, professionalism, and transparency, while maintaining full accountability to the public and stakeholders. The standards emphasize periodic independent evaluations of EQA agencies to ensure their credibility, relevance, and effectiveness. These evaluations should consider governance structures, internal quality assurance mechanisms, stakeholder engagement, and the consistent application of standards. Through the implementation of Part C, the ASG-QA promotes a coherent, trustworthy, and harmonized regional quality assurance ecosystem that supports the development of robust higher education systems across Africa.

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

INQAAHE developed agency evaluation principles in the mid-2000s, which evolved into Guidelines of Good Practice, eventually becoming International Standards and Guidelines in 2002. This movement, initiated by quality assurance networks, aimed to demonstrate the quality of agency work and reinforce their legitimacy at national, regional, and international levels.

European Higher Education Area

In the EHEA standards and guidelines were established as early as 2005 by ENQA, both inspired by European Consortium for Accreditation's Code of Good Practice, itself inspired by INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice (INQAAHE, 2021).

United States

In the United States, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) International Quality Group formulated the International Quality Principles: Toward a Shared Understanding of Quality in 2016 (Uvalić-Trumbić, 2016).

What are the objectives of the agencies going through an external review?

Ensuring consistency and accountability in QA:

- Helps verify that QA agencies operate with integrity, transparency, and effectiveness.
- Ensures QA agencies comply with international standards such as the African Standards and Guidelines, the European Standards and Guidelines or the International Standards and Guidelines or, aimed to foster mutual recognition.

Supporting continuous improvement of QA Agencies:

- Encourages QA agencies to align with evolving higher education trends.

Preparing for registration in Quality Assurance Register:

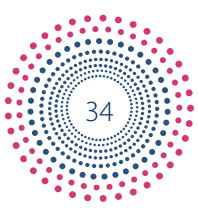
- In Europe, ENQA membership and ESG compliance became a key pathway for agencies to apply for listing in European Quality Assurance Register.

Source: INQAAHE, 2025 and Karakhanyan, 2020.

The INQAAHE Global study on Trends in quality assurance in tertiary education (Karakhanyan, 2020) highlights that several regional standards and guidelines have been established to be better positioned to assess the functional effectiveness of an EQA system. When evaluating an EQA Body, it appears common practice to identify the following:

- The specific purpose and nature of the established system. In particular, the rationale considers the problems the system is designed to address and its political dimensions. Closely related to this are the specific consequences associated with the outcomes of external evaluations.
- The functions assigned to ensure the achievement of the system's purpose. These may focus solely on the external evaluation of HE providers or may also incorporate capacity-building elements.

The history of the evaluation of QA agencies dates to 1965, when the United States Department of State began recognising accrediting bodies (Hegji, 2024). The primary objective was to ensure that students receiving federal funding were enrolled in accredited HEIs. This led to the emergence of national standards and processes aimed at ensuring that these institutions met specific federal quality criteria.



In 1998, CHEA, two years after its establishment, launched the recognition of American quality assurance agencies by publishing standards focused on academic quality and institutional self-regulation (CHEA, 2024). In 2005, ENQA began conducting reviews in accordance with European Standards and Guidelines published that same year (ENQA, 2015). In 2011, external evaluations were introduced by INQAAHE (INQAAHE, 2021) against the Guidelines of Good Practice, aiming to help quality assurance agencies improve their practices. The same year, the Asia-Pacific Quality Network established the Chiba Principles and initiated recognition based on these principles (IIAR, 2011). In Latin America, the Regional Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (RIACES) launched external reviews of agencies across the continent in 2012, based on best practice guidelines established by INQAAHE. From 2024 onwards, INQAAHE has launched the first evaluations based on the International Standards and Guidelines (INQAAHE, 2022).

The Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) Initiative, financed by the European Union in cooperation with the African Union, supports the development of a continental QA system. The initiative, started in 2015 to support the African Standards and Guidelines, is now supporting Pan-African Quality Assurance Alliance, a continental body to safeguard and further support the ASG-QA.

The Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF) is an initiative endorsed by the African Union to strengthen and harmonize quality assurance systems in higher education across the continent. Developed in collaboration with key continental and international partners, PAQAF aims to enhance trust, comparability, and recognition of qualifications within Africa and beyond. It provides a common continental framework that supports the development of national and regional quality assurance agencies, promotes the ASG-QA, and fosters mobility, transparency, and mutual recognition across diverse higher education systems.

Zoom on the European standards and guidelines: why did ENQA create the ESG in 2005?

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) were developed in 2005 as a key milestone in the advancement of quality assurance (QA) in higher education across Europe. Their creation was driven by the need for a unified approach to QA, aligning with the broader objectives of the Bologna Process and the establishment of the EHEA. At the time, QA systems varied significantly across countries, leading to inconsistencies in the recognition of qualifications and difficulties in fostering mutual trust between institutions and national frameworks.

The ESG provided a common set of principles aimed at ensuring the comparability and transparency of QA practices. By establishing shared standards, they enabled universities, external QA agencies, and national authorities to operate within a coherent framework, fostering confidence in the quality and credibility of European degrees. This was essential for enhancing student and academic mobility, as well as for strengthening the recognition of qualifications across borders.

Beyond creating a structured QA framework, the ESG also sought to instil a culture of quality within HEIs. Rather than viewing QA as a bureaucratic requirement, the ESG encouraged universities to adopt continuous improvement practices, taking ownership of their internal QA processes. This shift helped embed quality enhancement at the heart of institutional strategies, ensuring that higher education institutions remained responsive to evolving academic and societal needs.

By providing a common foundation for quality assurance, the ESG played a transformative role in shaping the European higher education landscape. They not only reinforced trust in academic standards but also contributed to a more integrated, dynamic, and student-centred EHEA (Tomas and Kelo, 2018).

The African standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education at a glance

The ASG-QA were developed in response to the growing need for a harmonised quality assurance framework across the African continent. Initiated under the African Union's PAQAF, the ASG-QA aim to strengthen internal and external quality assurance systems, foster comparability of qualifications, and support regional integration in higher education.

The initiative recognizes that while quality assurance systems exist in many African countries, they vary widely in maturity, scope, and effectiveness, often hindering student and staff mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications.

The ASG-QA were formally launched under the HAQAA Initiative, co-funded by the European Union and the African Union. Designed through an inclusive and consultative process involving African quality assurance agencies, HEIs, and regional bodies, the ASG-QA reflect a shared African vision of quality in higher education, while drawing on global good practices. They provide a common reference point for QA processes across diverse linguistic and educational contexts, including Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabophone systems.

The core purpose of the ASG-QA is threefold: first, to guide HEIs in the development and implementation of robust IQA systems; second, to support the work of EQA agencies in conducting effective and credible evaluations; and third, to offer a continental benchmark for assessing and comparing quality across institutions and national systems. By articulating clear standards for governance, teaching and learning, research, student support, and institutional effectiveness, the ASG-QA aim to enhance transparency and trust in African higher education.

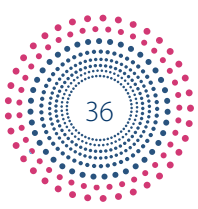
Furthermore, the ASG-QA serve as an enabling tool for continental initiatives such as the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) and the African Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ACTAS). By reinforcing coherence across these frameworks, the ASG-QA contribute to the African Union's broader objectives of improving access, equity, and relevance in HE. They also underpin the development of mutual recognition arrangements and the ACQF, key components of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25).

In sum, the ASG-QA represent a landmark achievement in the continental effort to harmonise and elevate the quality of HE in Africa. Their establishment reflects a shared commitment among African states and stakeholders to build sustainable, inclusive, and high-quality HE systems that respond to the continent's development needs and global aspirations.

The use of ASG-QA: good practices and challenges as highlighted in HAQAA analytical report

The HAQAA initiative report highlights several good practices that have emerged from the implementation of ASG-QA. Many agencies have effectively integrated ASG-QA principles into their national frameworks, ensuring alignment with regional and global QA trends. The report identifies capacity-building initiatives as a critical factor in successful implementation, with agencies conducting training workshops and stakeholder engagements to reinforce QA processes. Additionally, peer review mechanisms have been instrumental in fostering collaboration among quality assurance agencies, enabling shared learning and continuous improvement. The integration of digital tools for QA assessments has also been highlighted as a positive development, allowing for more efficient data collection, reporting, and decision-making processes.

The report also identifies several challenges in the implementation of ASG-QA. One of the primary issues is the varying levels of institutional readiness, as some agencies face limited financial and human resources, making it difficult to fully implement ASG-QA recommendations. Additionally, regulatory misalignment between national policies and ASG-QA guidelines has created inconsistencies in accreditation and evaluation standards. The report also highlights resistance to change among some institutions, particularly where existing QA frameworks differ significantly from ASG-QA requirements. Moreover, the lack of standardized data collection systems has hindered agencies' ability to conduct comprehensive quality assessments and benchmarking exercises.



To overcome these challenges, the report emphasizes the need for stronger policy alignment, increased technical and financial support, and greater stakeholder engagement. Encouraging governments and institutions to prioritize QA in higher education will be crucial for the successful implementation of ASG-QA. Furthermore, fostering a culture of continuous improvement through training, digitalization, and cross-border collaboration will enhance the overall effectiveness of quality assurance agencies. Moving forward, addressing these challenges will be essential to ensuring that ASG-QA fulfils its intended role in strengthening Africa's HE landscapes (HAQAA, 2023).

Activity on African standards and guidelines: examining ownership and implementation conditions for HEIs and quality assurance agencies

Facilitate a focus group with staff of QA agency for external evaluation (standards and guidelines for external QA and internal QA of QA agencies) and QA units at HEIs (standards and guidelines for internal QA).

Ice-breaking question on awareness and understanding

- How familiar are you with the African Quality Assurance Standards and Guidelines (ASG)?
- In what ways do you and your institution/agency engage with these standards?
- Has your EQA or IQA system been aligned to ASG?
- How do ASG compare with other national (and if you know, regional, or international) quality assurance frameworks?

Value and impact

- What benefits have you seen from implementing ASG in your institution/agency? And for the programmes and institutions following an external review?
- How has ASG influenced teaching, research, and overall institutional quality of the programmes and institutions following an external review?
- Can you share specific examples where ASG led to significant improvements?

Challenges and barriers

- What are the biggest challenges in implementing ASG in your institution/agency?
- How do financial, policy, or capacity constraints affect quality assurance implementation?

Enhancement and future directions

- What strategies would help improve the adoption/implementation of ASG?
- How can African universities collaborate better to strengthen QA processes a) with the QA agencies b) among themselves?
- What role should policymakers, accreditation bodies, and institutions play in advancing QA? To what extent the ASG are valuable?

Annex 1: Relevant resources

African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) Manual

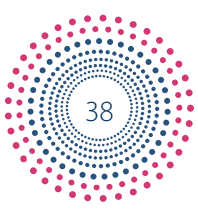
https://haqaa.aau.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ASG-QA_Manual_en_09.FINALE-with-License.pdf

INQAAHE International Standards and Guidelines (ISG)

<https://www.inqaahe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/INQAAHE-International-Standards-and-Guidelines-ISG.pdf>

IQA policy briefs on 7 different institutions implementing inspiring internal QA policies.

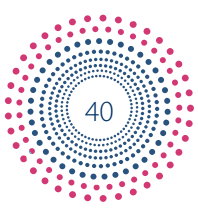
<https://www.iiep.unesco.org/fr/articles/new-policy-briefs-internal-quality-assurance-higher-education>



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Module 2

Quality Assurance Assessment Methods

Kalawathie Bella Sattar

Table of Contents

Acronyms	43
2.1 Introduction	44
2.2 Learning Outcomes	44
2.3. Key concepts	44
2.3.1 What is quality assessment?	44
2.3.2 Purposes of assessment and evaluation	45
2.4 External evaluation	47
2.4.1 Accreditation	48
2.4.2 Peer review	48
2.5 Internal evaluation	49
2.5.1 Self-evaluation	50
2.5.2 Benchmarking	51
2.6 Managing the self-evaluation process	52
2.6.1 Institutional and academic programme self-evaluation	52
2.6.2 Self-evaluation phases and activities	52
2.6.3 Planning and preparation	54
2.6.4 Data collection	55
2.6.5 Analysis and interpretation	55
2.6.6 Reporting and documentation	56
2.6.7 Stakeholder review and validation	58
2.6.8 Action planning and improvement	58
2.6.9 Follow-up and monitoring	58
2.7 Criteria and standards	59
2.8 Quantitative and qualitative tools and metrics	60
2.8.1 Feedback mechanisms	60
2.8.2 Key performance indicators (KPIs)	61
2.8.3 Use of technology and data analytics	62
2.8.4 Qualitative feedback	62

Acronyms

- ASG-QA** African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
- EQA** External quality assurance
- ESG** Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
- FG** Focus groups
- HoD** Head of department
- HE** Higher education
- HEI** Higher education institution
- IQA** Internal quality assurance
- QA** Quality assurance
- QAA** Quality assurance agency
- SAR** Self-assessment report
- SER** Self-evaluation report



2.1 Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher education (HE), ensuring quality is crucial for fostering academic excellence, enhancing stakeholder trust, and maintaining global competitiveness. Internal quality assurance (IQA) systems are critical for HEIs. While IQA processes focus mainly on teaching and learning, these processes include consideration of human resources, achievement of strategic goals and targets, and tracking student performance through management information, among others. Assessment and evaluation are purposeful activities that generate evidence which is used for decision-making, and it contributes to improving management effectiveness. Martin (2018) emphasises that *'Linking IQA results to key management areas is a key tool for developing an effective and coherent management system, oriented towards continuous quality improvement'* (Martin, 2018, pp. 3-4).

Quality in HE is assessed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative tools, from accreditation and peer reviews to student feedback and outcome-based metrics. The key to effective quality assurance (QA) is using a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that considers institutional, national, regional, continental and international standards, as well as the specific needs of stakeholders.

This training module provides participants with an understanding of QA assessment and evaluation methods, emphasizing their importance in institutional effectiveness and continuous improvement. By exploring a variety of assessment tools and practices, practical insights will be gained into evaluating programme and institutional performance, fostering accountability, and driving innovation in QA processes.

This module combines theoretical knowledge with practical application, ensuring that you are well-equipped to implement and enhance QA assessment methods in your institution. For this module, it is assumed that the learning outcomes of Module 1 have already been achieved.

2.2 Learning Outcomes

By completing this module, you will be able to:

- Identify various QA assessment methods and evaluate their applicability and effectiveness;
- Contextualise the roles of stakeholders in QA processes and how their input influences assessment outcomes;²
- Describe quantitative and qualitative tools for measuring quality and apply them appropriately;
- Design and implement QA assessment strategies tailored to institutional needs, and promoting and strengthening a quality culture;
- Apply lessons learned to your institutional context including shaping your institutional quality culture.

2.3. Key concepts

2.3.1 What is quality assessment?

Quality is an important critical success factor at HEIs, and the quality of provision is assessed/evaluated through the IQA system which is an integral part of a functioning university quality management system. Such QA activities are systematised in the quality cycle, that is, plan-do-check-act (PDCA) and quality assessment relates to the 'Check' moment in the cycle (see figure 1 below)³. It is important that IQA processes in HEIs are intentionally designed to maintain this cycle (Krooi et al., 2024) and that assessment itself is a cyclical, ongoing activity in the institution and not a 'once-off' event.

² The learning outcome on stakeholder engagement is addressed in module 1. In module 2, you are expected to apply this knowledge in the context of quality assessment.

³ Module 1 of this handbook provides details of the quality cycle.

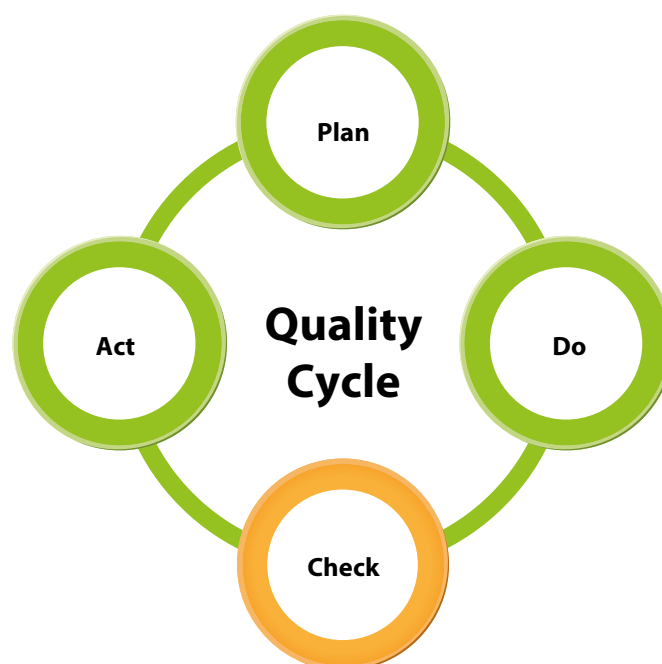


Figure 1: The Quality Cycle

Before we delve further into the types of quality assessments, we need to understand the concept of assessment of quality. In the context of QA, the terms ‘assessment’ and ‘evaluation’ are used often, and they are used interchangeably. What is assessment, and does it differ from evaluation? If so, how?

Pistor and Stammen (2017, p. 16), refer to Secolsky and Denison (2012) who describe assessment as the ‘... *collection, analysis and interpretation of information related to a particular issue or outcome of interest*’ while evaluation is described as ‘... *determining the worth, value or effectiveness of something - often some kind of program*’. At BetterEvaluation⁴ evaluation is described as ‘...*any systematic process to judge merit, worth or significance by combining evidence and values*’.

A broad range of activities, for example, monitoring, review, self-evaluation, benchmarking, impact analysis, and appreciative inquiry, are evaluative but may have different purposes. In this module the terms assessment and evaluation are used interchangeably and are not mutually exclusive.

2.3.2 Purposes of assessment and evaluation

What motivates assessment and evaluation? Why do we do it? The purpose of assessment and evaluation is dependent on the institutional context as well as the institutional quality culture. The institutional context and culture are influenced by the national context and regulatory requirements for EQA. At the institutional level, evaluation focuses on the improvement of quality, and the outcome of evaluation should result in strategies for doing things better. It is important to understand the prevailing institutional context and culture, and the readiness of the institution for evaluative activities (Green and Kirk, 2024). This may require a ‘slowly-slowly’ approach so that a culture of trust is established.

Clarity on the purpose of an evaluation will ensure that appropriate decisions are made regarding methods, processes, resources required, and stakeholder involvement. Evaluation must be fit-for-purpose. In HE, it is usually undertaken to make decisions about improvement measures resulting in the development of a quality improvement plan. It is important that evaluations are not used for purposes that will contribute to the erosion of trust and institutional quality culture. This is a potential risk pertaining to internal evaluation (refer to section 4.5).

The focus of evaluation is on the core activities of the HEI that is teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. The institution may be evaluated as a whole, or discrete activities and/or processes may be evaluated.

⁴ <https://www.betterevaluation.org>

Since the primary goal of HE is continuous improvement to enhance student success, continuous improvement should therefore be the focus of evaluation (Vykydal et al., 2020, p. 4).

Two broad categories of evaluation may be identified: internal evaluation and external evaluation. Both involve various methods and tools designed to evaluate different aspects of an institution's performance, from teaching and learning to research, student satisfaction, and institutional effectiveness. These methods may relate to EQA and or IQA activities and include self- evaluation, peer review, accreditation, and benchmarking.

Internal evaluation is conducted by the institution in alignment with its IQA framework and is led by senior management usually through the QA directorate. Internal evaluation also prepares the department/institution for external evaluation processes. As part of the process of evaluation, the department/institution considers whether it is doing the right things in the right way through reflection on the following evaluative questions:

- What are we doing?
- Why are we doing it?
- How are we doing it?
- Why are we doing it the way that we do?
- How do we know that it is working?

External evaluation is conducted by national regulatory authorities, for example, the national QA agency, professional councils, or national bodies with a legislated QA mandate, among others. These evaluations are conducted using agreed standards/guidelines/criteria. Both internal and external evaluation are cyclical activities. The relationship between IQA and EQA is illustrated in figure 2 below, where the arrows signify directions of influence (Giller, 2023).

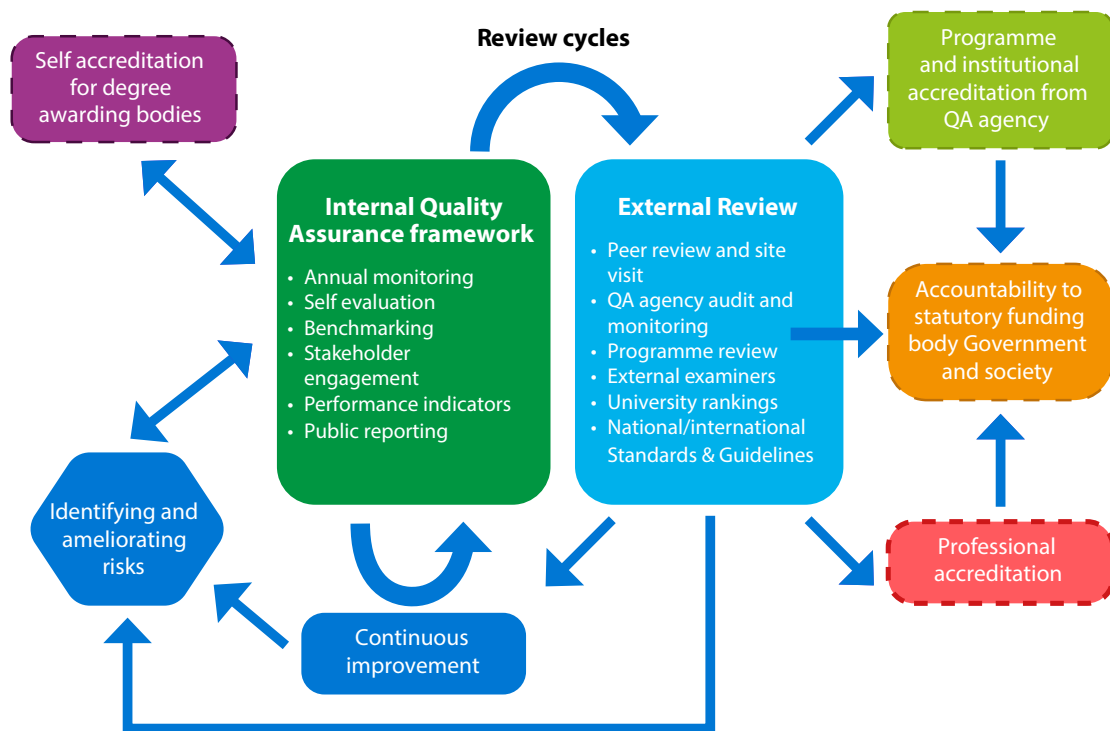


Figure 2: Relationship between IQA and EQA (Giller, 2023)

In some contexts, the HEI may elect to have specific aspects of the institution externally evaluated as part of its IQA system. The case study below highlights the role of external evaluation as an IQA tool.

External evaluation enhances strategic planning at UT, Chile

External evaluation has been an effective IQA tool at the University of Talca (UT), a medium-sized public university with a predominantly regional outreach, located in Chile. Since 2009, UT has used a comprehensive IQA system that includes management evaluation, a compulsory element of institutional accreditation, operated by the National Accreditation Commission (CNA). This tool determines the degree to which the university is able to ensure continuous improvement towards internal goal achievement. This process begins with self-evaluation and is followed by an external evaluation of financial sustainability, in preparation for the visit from external advisors. The visit consists of meetings with authorities and staff members of different organizational levels and is followed up with oral feedback and a written report. Finally, an institutional improvement plan is developed in response to the problem areas identified by the peer observation, and the final decision of the CNA. Both the finalized written report and the CNA decision are open to appeal by the institution. Among all of UT's management tools, external evaluation of management was perceived as having the greatest effect on strategic planning by the administrative staff.

(Martin, 2018, p.2)

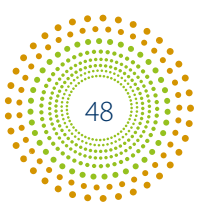
2.4 External evaluation

External evaluation in HE is conducted on a cyclical basis within the context of the national legislative framework and EQA requirements within which an HEI operates. EQA is applicable at different levels within the institution, that is, programme or institutional level. The purpose and scope of the evaluation is underpinned by the applicable standards and/or criteria which are different for programme accreditation vis-à-vis institutional accreditation/review. External evaluation is usually conducted by the national QAA and other regulatory bodies. Where the evaluation pertains to programme accreditation, it may be conducted jointly with relevant professional councils that also have a legislated mandate for QA.

The external agency has responsibility for appointing external experts as evaluators. External evaluators do not have vested interests in the process, tend to be more objective, and they infuse fresh perspectives into the evaluation process. Thus, the potential conflict between external evaluators and internal staff is externalised. However, external evaluation is more time-consuming for the institution regarding preparation for the evaluation and it needs to ensure that external evaluators receive the necessary information within a fixed timeframe to allow sufficient time for them to become familiar with the institutional context, etc. (Stockmann, 2024, p. 263). It is also time and resource intensive. For example, the institution needs to start the planning and preparation processes at least 12 to 18 months before the date of an institutional evaluation and the processes may require additional human, financial and other resources. Furthermore, institutions may feel under pressure to ensure that they are fully compliant with requirements. This could result in 'wet paint', that is, new policies, processes and initiatives developed and implemented in preparation for an impending external evaluation.

Approaches to external evaluation include peer review, programme accreditation, and institutional accreditation (also known as institutional review). These approaches are not mutually exclusive; peer review is an integral part of programme, and institutional accreditation. From the EQA guidelines in the ASG-QA (2017) which require QAAs to develop standards that include 'Standards and guidelines for periodic/cyclical programme accreditation/evaluation/assessment/audit; and/or Standards and guidelines for periodic/cyclical institutional accreditation / evaluation / assessment /audit' (ASG-QA, 2017. p. 28), it is evident that terminology that is used is not cast in stone.⁵

⁵ Terminology is context-specific, and national QAAs and other regulatory authorities specify the definitions and or characteristics associated with various approaches to EQA.



2.4.1 Accreditation

Accreditation is an EQA process whereby self-evaluation and external peer review are used to evaluate whether the agreed quality criteria or standards have been met. Depending on the national regulatory context, accreditation could be at an institutional level, that is accreditation/review of the whole institution, or it could be at the level of academic programmes. In some countries both are applicable while in others only academic programmes are accredited and institutions are subjected to institutional reviews. Programme accreditation may also be conducted at an international level, but this is at the discretion of the HEI. Accreditation is a cyclical activity. For example, an academic programme or an HEI may be accredited for a period of five years after which re-accreditation is required. The guidelines in the ASG-QA stipulate that 'programmes are subject to continuous monitoring and evaluation (including periodic external review) and development to ensure currency, quality and relevance' (ASG-QA, 2017, p. 20).

While the focus of programme accreditation is on the assessment of individual study programmes in accordance with agreed standards/criteria, these programmes are offered within an institutional environment. Thus, programme accreditation standards/criteria also consider broader institutional issues such as the alignment of the programme with the vision and mission of the institution, and the allocation of financial, human and physical resources. Therefore, the outcomes of the process for accreditation results in decisions for improvement at the level at which it is needed as there may be quality issues to be addressed at the departmental level and at the institutional level.

Many academic programmes also lead to professional registration with relevant professional bodies and these bodies have a vested interest in programme accreditation. The standards/criteria for accreditation of such programmes are therefore also aligned with the requirements of the profession. Thus, the programme accreditation process also assesses whether the programme meets the requirements of the profession.

Institutional accreditation/review⁶ is a comprehensive EQA process to verify that the institution has relevant policies, processes, systems and structures to support its core areas of teaching and learning, research and community engagement and that it meets the agreed minimum standards. The review is conducted using agreed standards/criteria that apply to the whole institution and the process requires the submission of the institutional self-evaluation report prior to the site visit and peer review by external evaluators appointed by the EQA. Accreditation is valid for a prescribed period.

2.4.2 Peer review

Peer review is a widely adopted QA method in higher education that involves the evaluation of an institution or programme by external experts from similar or related fields. It is grounded in the principle that colleagues with relevant expertise are best positioned to assess the institution's academic programmes, governance, practices, among others, for quality, effectiveness, and areas for improvement. Peer review is enhanced through the externality of the industry representatives, and the chairperson and members of the evaluation panel who are usually from other HEIs.

Peer review is not without its challenges, as academic staff, especially in the creative fields, might be reluctant to openly share information on their practices with other institutions and may be unwilling to engage with the evaluation panel. Furthermore, the effectiveness thereof is also dependent on the quality of the peer review panel thus indicating a need for training of peer reviewers⁷ (Giller, 2023).

Once an institution is informed of the date for the external evaluation, the institution undertakes a process of self-evaluation and prepares a self-evaluation report (SER)/self-assessment report (SAR) with supporting evidence. The documents are sent to the EQA authority and serve as a basis for the external evaluation. Note that self-evaluation is an important feature of the IQA framework as well and is discussed in greater detail in sections 2.5.1 and 2.6.

⁶ The term audit is generally not used as it tends to focus on a technical approach to QA.

⁷ This is applicable to internal peer reviewers as well.

A panel of external experts, appointed by the external agency, conducts the evaluation which includes interviews with staff, students and other relevant stakeholders. The panel has responsibility for verifying the claims made in the SER through triangulating information from the interviews with the supporting evidence provided with the SER. The panel concludes its evaluative activity by finalising a report to the external agency. The panel is bound by a confidentiality agreement according to the regulations of the external agency. The process does not stop here as the institution is usually required to respond to the recommendations in the report. The EQA authority stipulates follow-up processes and timeframes.

The institution has an opportunity to comment on the report regarding errors of fact, errors of interpretation and errors of omission. On finalisation of the report by the agency, and if no serious contestations arise, the report or an executive summary thereof may be made public. The institution is responsible for the development of a quality improvement plan (QIP) which specifies the timeframes and resources required to effect improvement. The EQA agency may also specify a follow-up visit to the institution to evaluate progress with the implementation of the QIP. The maturity of the institution's quality culture, systems, and processes have a bearing on how staff, students, and other stakeholders experience the EQA process and the extent to which there is ownership of the QIP. The QIP is also an important monitoring tool for the institution and is used in internal evaluations.

2.5 Internal evaluation

Internal evaluation is an integral part of IQA and may be conducted at various 'levels' within the institution (refer to figure 3) including process, module, programme, academic or support department, faculty, and institutional level. Internal evaluation is cyclical in accordance with the IQA framework and links to the EQA evaluation/review cycles (refer to figure 2). Internal evaluation is most beneficial when it is embedded as an institutional strategy in the IQA framework thus promoting institutional ownership of related processes and outcomes. The IQA framework in figure 3 identifies various internal evaluation activities/methods which are discussed further in this module.

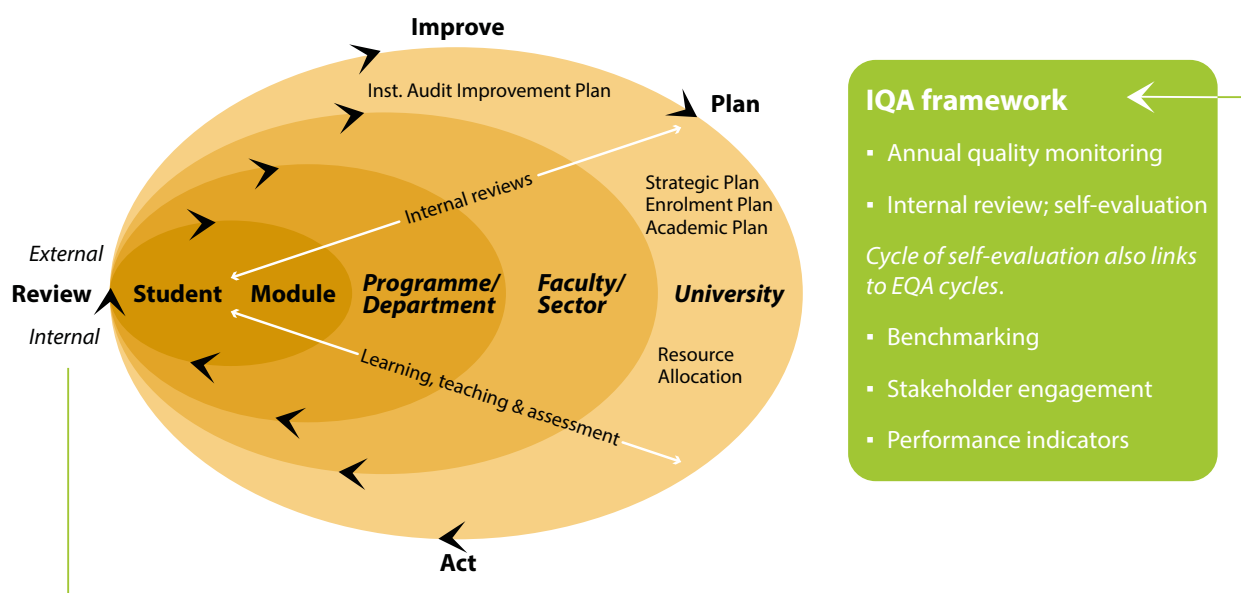
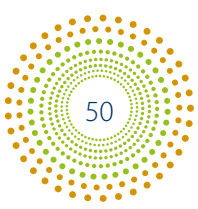


Figure 3: IQA framework and 'levels' of internal evaluation activities (adapted from Sattar and Cooke, 2012)

Internal evaluations are designed and managed internally by the HEI at agreed frequencies or as flagged by other processes. For example, the annual monitoring of a module may necessitate a programme review to evaluate the curriculum of the programme. Staff who are tasked with this responsibility, for example the QA unit, are more knowledgeable about the institution and the staff than external evaluators. In addition, the relationship of trust that



has been nurtured over time is a positive factor in promoting such evaluation. However, there is a potential risk that objectivity may be compromised. Furthermore, the outcome of internal evaluation may erode collegial relationships leading to conflict within the institution, thus placing the QA unit in an invidious position. The institutional leadership has a vital role to play in mitigating this risk and ensuring that the purpose of an internal evaluation is clear to all stakeholders. It is also essential to nurture an institutional quality culture so that an enabling environment is established to support internal evaluation.

Internal evaluation may also require the development of a self-evaluation report depending on the requirements of the IQA system and may include external participants in the process. For example, annual monitoring at the module level requires the respective lecturer to develop a reflective report on the module which may include feedback from industry partners for the provision of work-integrated learning. The module review report is submitted to the head of department (HoD) who prepares a consolidated programme report across all the modules, highlighting challenges and opportunities, student performance, and student feedback on lecturers, among others. Annual monitoring of modules may be regarded as a 'pulse-reading' of the academic health of the programme.

Activity: Reflection on the IQA system

- What are the elements of your institution's IQA system?
- What consultative process did you follow to develop the system?
- What is the understanding of quality culture at your institution?
- How does the IQA system promote a quality culture?
- How do you know this?

2.5.1 Self-evaluation

Self-assessment or self-evaluation is the process of critically reviewing the quality of one's own performance and provision against a pre-agreed set of criteria. There is no single model for self-evaluation (self-review, self-study or self-assessment) which is an essential element of IQA systems. It is a process by which an institution ascertains the quality of the institution or of its programmes through a critical appraisal of itself or of its programmes. It requires the institution to engage with external stakeholders and therefore has a broad, systematic focus. Institutions conduct self-evaluations of, for example, module/course content, student engagement, teaching methodologies, and research output using a set of pre-determined standards/criteria and/or quality indicators. The self-evaluation outcomes provide the institution with evidence-based judgements on the effectiveness of its IQA system.

It is important that principles for self-evaluation are identified in the IQA system as this will contribute to the promotion of a positive quality culture. The following key features of self-evaluation should be embedded in the principles:

- **Clarification of purpose:** The purpose of self-evaluation delineates the boundaries of the self-evaluation process and outcomes. It should clarify why the evaluation is being undertaken, who will benefit from the process, who will receive the final report and what the report will be used for.
- **Improvement oriented:** Self-evaluation is used to identify opportunities for improvement, and the outcomes thereof should not be personalised or used against any individual. Professionalism and collegiality should always be maintained.
- **Non-judgemental:** Self-evaluation should be aligned with the requirements of the IQA system which should also indicate the criteria and/or standards to be used.

- **Leadership:** While the head of the QA unit has a key role to play, it is important that senior academic leadership is seen to be integral to the process.

One of the main benefits of the self-evaluation process is that the department/institution is well-prepared for internal and external evaluation processes through reflection on whether it is doing the right things in the right way. It could therefore be regarded as an important link between IQA and EQA as illustrated earlier in Figure 2. Other benefits include enhancement of the reputation of the institution and staff, improved staff morale, and the promotion of scholarship in QA, curriculum development, teaching and learning, among others.

Some common challenges experienced with self-evaluation include an increased workload for some staff for which there is no additional remuneration, additional costs that need to be budgeted for, lack of support from staff and lack of clarity on the 'value-add' to the institution.

The self-evaluation process is discussed in greater detail in section 2.6.

Activity: Self-evaluation

- Develop a detailed project plan with timelines for the internal review of an academic programme.
- Identify the roles and responsibilities for relevant departmental staff.
- What steps do you need to follow to implement this plan?
- To whom will the final report be submitted?

2.5.2 Benchmarking

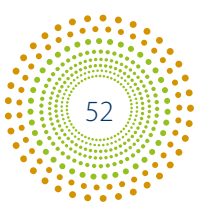
Benchmarking is a process that enables comparison of inputs, processes or outputs between institutions (or parts of institutions) or within a single institution over time (Harvey, 2004-25). Through benchmarking, existing solutions to problems are used for improvement in one's own institution. The data, analyses and assessments necessary can be obtained via evaluations (Stockman, 2024, p. 83). It is important that data is reliable and regularly available to support benchmarking efforts.

Institutions may compare their performance against peer institutions or set benchmarks in areas such as teaching quality, research output, or student satisfaction. Benchmarking provides valuable insights by identifying gaps in performance, strengths and weaknesses, and justifying current practices.

Internal benchmarking is an activity within an institution where comparisons may be made between two different departments and/or processes. External benchmarking is an activity where comparisons are made with other HEIs in the region. International benchmarking could involve comparing an institution's practices with internationally recognized standards, particularly for institutions engaged in international collaborations.

Benchmarking should be realistic and aimed at helping institutions within similar national systems and with similar profiles to make comparisons in areas such as governance and management, academic profile, inclusion and equity, quality of learning and teaching, knowledge transfer, and internationalization. It is crucial that the purpose of benchmarking is clear, and for the information gained to be translated into actionable insights.

One challenge associated with benchmarking is inappropriate comparisons being made, which can arise when institutions benchmark against those that are not truly comparable. Another challenge relates to inertia which may occur when benchmarking reveals that an institution is performing adequately, leading to complacency and a lack of



motivation for improvement. Mission creep, that is, where institutions gradually expand their activities or goals beyond their original mission or core competencies, may be an unintended consequence of benchmarking (Basset, 2024).

Many institutions participate in ranking activities which place emphasis on hierarchical comparisons and prestige linked to pre-determined and weighted criteria. This differs from benchmarking which aims to facilitate well-informed comparisons among institutions based on specific areas of activities thus allowing institutional agency in determining appropriate criteria for comparison.

2.6 Managing the self-evaluation process

The implementation of self-evaluation is structured according to phases, that is planning, collecting information/data, analysis and reflection, and report writing and follow-up (Stockman, 2024). These phases are not discrete, and processes tend to overlap each other. It is important to bear in mind that self-evaluation is not a linear process. These phases can be disaggregated and expanded in relation to the activities that have been identified. It is necessary to map out the evaluation according to activities to ensure that critical steps have not been overlooked. The QA unit in the institution is responsible for the management of self-evaluation processes, and reports to the executive management of the institution accordingly.

2.6.1 Institutional and academic programme self-evaluation

Self-evaluation and peer review processes underpin institutional evaluation and academic programme evaluation. In these processes quality is measured against criteria and standards that have been agreed by the institution. Self-evaluation is conducted internally by the HEI using internal staff. Collegial peer review may be combined with the self-evaluation process through a validation panel where the chairperson is from another HEI. External stakeholders, such as industry representatives and representatives from relevant professional councils, may also be included. The important consideration is that the outcomes of the process, namely the validation panel report and recommendations, are confidential to the institution and may not be disseminated externally.

While self-evaluation is implemented by HEIs as an integral part of their IQA processes, it is also informed by external quality assurance processes and requirements. For example, in the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA, pp. 28-29), the self-assessment/self-evaluation report (SAR/SER) together with supporting evidence provides a foundation for EQA processes.

From an IQA perspective, the QA unit develops a timetable for institutional and programme self-evaluation on a cyclical basis. This takes into consideration the periodicity of EQA activities including programme accreditation by professional councils and other regulatory authorities to avoid duplication of activities.

The phases and activities associated with self-evaluation apply to both institutional and programme self-evaluation. Therefore, these phases will be discussed in greater detail in the following section using the example of institutional self-evaluation, and highlighting any significant differences related to programme self-evaluation where applicable.

2.6.2 Self-evaluation phases and activities

In this section, the phases of the institutional self-evaluation process have been expanded to seven in relation to the identified activities, and a validation phase has been included. A summary of the self-evaluation phases and activities, as well as examples of supporting evidence/data that should be gathered, is presented in Table 1.

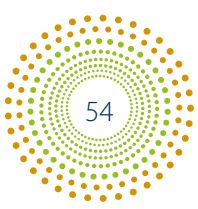
Phase	Key activities	Supporting evidence
1. Planning and preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish self-evaluation WG⁸ Define scope and objectives Develop timeline and methodology, budget, responsibilities Obtain executive management approval 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional mission, vision, and strategic plan QA policies and frameworks Self-evaluation guidelines Data collection strategies Specific responsibilities of WG participants
2. Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify key areas for assessment (e.g., governance, teaching, research, student services)⁹ Gather qualitative and quantitative data Conduct surveys, interviews, town hall meetings, focus group discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional performance data Student feedback: lecturers, modules, experience surveys, graduate survey Faculty and staff feedback Academic programme reviews Graduate employability statistics
3. Analysis and interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare data against benchmarks and standards Develop and populate gap analysis tool and identify gaps Conduct SWOT analysis Assess alignment with institutional goals and QA standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accreditation and QA reports Benchmarking reports Gap analysis findings SWOT analysis findings Trends in student progression and completion rates
4. Reporting and documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a comprehensive SER Provide evidence-based recommendations Ensure clarity and transparency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SER, supporting evidence Case studies, lessons from benchmarking, identified good practices Feedback from stakeholders External review reports
5. Stakeholder review and validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collegial peer review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validation of report and recommendations¹⁰
6. Action planning and improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an improvement plan with clear timelines and responsibilities Implement quality enhancement initiatives Set up monitoring mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional QIP Resource allocation data Follow-up reports on previous action plans Stakeholder engagement records
7. Follow-up and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor progress and impact of improvements Review effectiveness of self-evaluation process Integrate findings into institutional decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance tracking data Updated QA policies and strategies Continuous improvement reports Feedback from EQA agency

Table 1: Self-evaluation in HE: phases, activities and examples of supporting evidence

⁸ Self-evaluation working group (WG)

⁹ This is dependent on whether the self-evaluation is at a programme level or at an institutional level.

¹⁰ For EQA processes, the validated SER is approved by the governance structure and is submitted to the QAA together with supporting documentation.



The excerpt below provides insight into the inclusion of a validation phase (mock-audit) in the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) self-evaluation processes.

Excerpt of self-evaluation report of the University of Johannesburg

In the Foreword of the self-evaluation report of the University of Johannesburg (UJ), South Africa, the Vice-Chancellor states that 'Considerable preparations have gone into this, including the conduct of an intensive external mock audit in February that was largely modelled on the formal Higher Education Quality Committee process, with a particular focus on and assessment of the UJ's Self-evaluation Report, and the UJ's overall readiness for the HEQC's institutional audit'.

Source: University of Johannesburg, 2009, p. i.

2.6.3 Planning and preparation

The importance of thorough planning cannot be overemphasised. This phase sets the foundation for a structured and effective self-evaluation process and involves setting the objectives, scope, and methodology for the self-evaluation process.

The ASG-QA prescribes the periodicity of institutional review which should be conducted on a five-year cycle. The dates for the respective institutional reviews are usually published by the national QAA and HEIs are informed accordingly. HEIs should begin planning for self-evaluation at least 12 months prior to the QAA site visit.

Extensive advocacy is critical and from the outset all staff should be aware of the planned self-evaluation and the date of the impending EQA process. This will encourage broad participation and ownership of the process. Self-evaluation should be an empowering exercise with clearly identified objectives.

Self-evaluation is not a 'one-person' activity. While the QA Unit has a key role in the process, it is necessary to establish a self-evaluation working group (WG) comprising of respected senior academics. The coordinator of the WG is usually the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning or equivalent in the institution. For example, in its SER, the University of Johannesburg states that, '*An Audit Steering Committee (ASC) was established as a sub-committee of the Senate Planning and Quality Committee to steer the preparations for the first quality audit by an HEQC Panel*'. The ASC developed an Audit Strategy for the period 2007 to 2010 which was approved by the management executive committee. In addition to the ASC, five audit task teams were identified based on clustering of the relevant criteria and were responsible for '*an analysis of the criteria in the UJ context, identification of relevant evidence and developing the first audit task team-specific draft of the SER*' (University of Johannesburg, 2009, pp. 2-3). The timeline of the UJ strategy highlights the importance of ensuring that there is sufficient time for self-evaluation in relation to the date of an external evaluation¹¹.

The WG takes overall responsibility for the self-evaluation. In addition, faculty quality/teaching and learning coordinators are identified who report to the WG and have clearly defined responsibilities relating to data collection and communication. The scope and objectives of the evaluation are clearly defined, ensuring alignment of evaluation criteria with national QA standards, institutional goals, accreditation requirements, and national/international QA frameworks. The ASG-QA and the relevant criteria from the national QAA are adapted by the institution for use in all self-evaluation activities and inform the structure and format of the SER¹².

¹¹ In preparation for an external Institutional Review/Audit, from personal experience, and reflections by colleagues, more time is required for the finalisation of the SER than envisaged. The inclusion of a validation phase will necessitate additional time before the SER can be finalised.

¹² In programme self-evaluation, where programmes are accredited by the QAA as well as professional bodies, the criteria for self-evaluation are adapted to reflect the requirements of both the QAA and the professional bodies.

A detailed timeline and methodology are developed with allocation of specific responsibilities to WG participants thus guiding the systematic assessment of institutional performance. The structure and format of the SER serve as a guideline for the allocation of responsibilities. Key reference documents, including the institutional mission, strategic plan, and QA policies, provide a framework for this phase. Data collection strategies are also clarified.

2.6.4 Data collection

At this stage, institutions gather relevant data to assess the quality and effectiveness of various aspects, such as governance, teaching and learning, research, and student services. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and institutional performance data analysis. Sources such as student satisfaction surveys, faculty and staff feedback, academic programme reviews, faculty performance reviews, graduation rates, research output, employer surveys, and graduate employability statistics offer valuable insights.

Ensuring data reliability and comprehensiveness is critical, as it forms the basis for meaningful evaluation and decision-making. It is good practice to have a dedicated area where all current and archived documents are stored and readily available in preparation for any internal/external process. Using an electronic document management system is an advantage as it can facilitate content analysis.

Note: Section 4.8 provides additional information on qualitative and quantitative tools and metrics.

2.6.5 Analysis and interpretation

Analysis is a systematic process. The findings are analysed by comparing them against institutional benchmarks, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and other institutional metrics, evaluation standards, and institutional goals. A SWOT analysis helps identify 'strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats', contributing to a broad understanding of the institution and its current state. A SWOT analysis typically involves a team in a group that brainstorms responses to each element of the SWOT. The team analyses the responses in relation to leveraging opportunities to enhance strengths, overcome weaknesses and counteract threats. Trends in student progression, completion rates, and external QA reviews provide further insights. This phase is crucial in determining areas that require improvement and aligning institutional practices with QA expectations.

A complementary approach is that of a gap analysis, which compares actual performance with desired performance. A gap analysis facilitates a 'deep dive' for assessing processes, issues, and challenges, among others. A simple methodology is to develop a gap analysis tool, that is, a table with questions related to the relevant criteria and standards. The institution responds to each question regarding the current position of the institution, its desired position, the action it needs to take to improve, and the target date. Sources of supporting evidence for the current position of the institution should be documented. In this way, a clear picture of the gaps will emerge, and an improvement plan can be developed accordingly. An example of a gap analysis tool is presented in Annex 1.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>What is working well in the institution and generates pride among staff (positive characteristics), for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff are highly qualified and have professional status as necessary • We are well-resourced in terms of academic staff • Our excellent research reputation 	<p>What is not working well, and generates frustration (negative characteristics), for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow administrative processes • Inadequate number of administrative staff • Weak quality culture (focus on control)
Opportunities	Threats
<p>External opportunities for overcoming weaknesses and building on strengths, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generative AI • There is significant interest in our programme across the SADC • Graduate employability 	<p>What could undermine opportunities for change?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive environment • Inadequate infrastructure

Figure 4: An example SWOT matrix

2.6.6 Reporting and documentation

An evidence-based SER is compiled using the findings from the preceding phases. The SER should not be only a descriptive presentation of the state of the institution. It presents a critical reflection on academic programmes, governance, research quality, student support services, and institutional management. It highlights achievements, identifies challenges, and provides evidence-based recommendations for quality enhancement.¹³

The SER and supporting documents serve as a reference for internal decision-makers and external QA agencies. Supporting documents include all sources of evidence gathered in relation to the relevant criteria and that support the assertions made by the institution. Any other external review reports, such as reports from professional bodies, may be included. The report should strike a balance between a description of what is being done and analysis of how well it is being done. The following extract from the University of Johannesburg's SER is one example of reflective analysis and reporting.

¹³ An example of the structure and format of an SER, aligned with the ASG-QA, is presented in Annex 2.

Conclusion in terms of audit criterion 2: Case study on the University of Johannesburg

In this final section of the chapter, institutional progress made (or the lack thereof) towards meeting the requirements of Audit Criterion 2 is reflected upon.

Criterion 2: Objectives and mechanisms for quality management are integrated into institutional planning. Financial planning ensures adequate resource allocation for the development, improvement and monitoring of quality in the core activities of teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

Over a period of just more than four years the 'new' University has done well to address the challenge of establishing a single institutional quality management system. The system is geared towards (vertically) all levels of management, i.e. institutional, campuses, faculties, as well as development, service and support units; and (horizontally) towards all focus areas relating to the institutional core functions and the support thereof. The system is (as of 2009) guided by a recently approved Quality Promotion Policy and an all-encompassing Quality Promotion Plan (the latter still has to gain the final nod of institutional approval). The quality system has been developed and paced in tandem with the realising of the institutional mission and strategic goals, and institutional research and subsequent planning goals are integrated into it. It is also supported by an extensive network of interrelated institutional policies, strategies and regulations.

The system, exemplified by the above-mentioned key documents and supportive measures, contains essential elements needed in striving to comply with Audit Criterion 2. The quality plan until 2015 (which needs to be complemented by faculty and division-specific prototypes) envisages the incorporation of shorter-term quality management objectives and longer-term goals relating to core institutional functions, makes provision for resource budgeting and allocation on various levels, and integrates various regular monitoring and review mechanisms as part of a continuous cycle of institutional improvement.

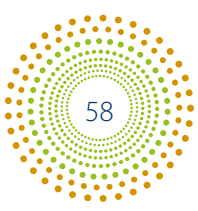
However, even if a sound quality management system has been crafted, the institution does not yet display the trademark of an exemplary quality ethos. The University's concept of quality is articulated as the desire for continuous improvement, or in the words of the Quality Promotion Policy: '...to assure a continuous and integrated cycle of planning, action, monitoring and review... with a view to effecting improvement.'

Numerous Senate and Council committees have a formal, though diverse, responsibility for quality assurance and promotion, especially with regard to academic quality (the institutional core functions). However, considering the limited time for sufficient impact of the abovementioned quality developments, it might be reasonable to assume that limited shared understanding of the quality concept (as described above), as well as the responsibility and authority for its assurance and promotion, is probably prevalent among a number of the institutional, faculty and divisional committees.

One reason could be general confusion about quality-related jargon among (especially academic) staff - a phenomenon that has time and again surfaced worldwide in the articles by several authors on quality promotion in HE. Secondly, even more compelling reason relates to the University's strategic decision to move away from a reactive ethos (where quality challenges and demands are mostly reacted to and not necessarily engaged with) towards a responsive quality ethos (where quality challenges and demands will be used to review practices and to establish pro-active improvement agendas).

The eager implementation of the Quality Promotion Policy and Plan (by one and all) will be a giant step towards a shared appreciation of an institutional quality ethos and thus compliance with the elements of Audit Criterion 2. Indicators of the latter ethos are already to be found in several 'pockets' of the institution, and perhaps the towards (quality in) unity ideal of the underlying institutional audit theme may be realised in just a few more years.

Source: University of Johannesburg, 2009, pp. 62-63.



2.6.7 Stakeholder review and validation

Once the SER has been written, it undergoes validation which is a collegial peer review process. The institution appoints a review panel with a senior academic from another HEI as the chairperson. The panel comprises key stakeholders, including academic staff representatives, student representatives, industry representatives, and representatives from professional bodies where applicable.

The review panel members sign a confidentiality agreement on accepting their appointment to the panel and their responsibilities are clearly communicated to them in writing. The panel reviews the SER to ensure accuracy and completeness and verifies that relevant supporting evidence is available to support the institution's claims. This includes verifying that improvement plans emanating from previous EQA processes have been implemented and that evidence thereof is available. The panel validates the SER through conducting various interviews and visiting the library for example. The review panel's feedback helps refine the findings and recommendations in the SER. The SER together with supporting documents comprises the institution's portfolio. Following validation, the SER is finalised and the portfolio submitted to the Senate or equivalent structure for approval. Thereafter, if the SER has been prepared for an EQA evaluation, the portfolio is submitted to the relevant external authority in accordance with EQA requirements.

2.6.8 Action planning and improvement

The institution develops a quality improvement plan (QIP) based on the recommendations made by the review panel. The plan should clearly outline improvements to be made, responsibilities, timelines, and resource allocations. To guide implementation, the plan should contain sufficient detail pertaining to manageable actions, tangible targets, resources required, and the projected timeframes for completion.

This phase translates self-evaluation findings into concrete steps for institutional enhancement, such as curriculum revision, staff professional development programmes, enhancement of student support, and infrastructure upgrades. It is essential that there is ownership of the QIP by all stakeholders. Refer to Module 1 for information on stakeholder engagement.

2.6.9 Follow-up and monitoring

A mechanism should be developed to monitor progress with the implementation of the QIP and the effectiveness of improvements. The long-term impact of improvements needs to be monitored. In this regard, relevant performance metrics should be identified and monitored, policies should be updated, and findings should be integrated into management planning and decision-making processes as applicable.

Activity on SWOT Analysis

- Conduct a SWOT analysis on teaching and learning in your institution.
- Using relevant criteria (institutional or external), develop a gap analysis tool to evaluate teaching and learning in your institution
- What have you learnt from each of the above activities? How do the outcomes from the above activities differ?
- Identify three areas for improvement that are 'quick wins', that is, improvement may be effected in the short term without additional resources.
- Identify three areas for improvement that are 'quick wins' but require resources to effect improvement.
- What is the impact of the requirement for additional resources on the timeframe for improvement?
- Using the above information, develop an improvement plan with timeframes and identify the resources required for each item in the plan.

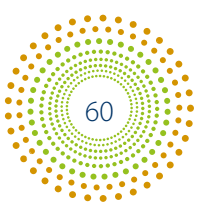
2.7 Criteria and standards

Quality assessment in HE typically involves a set of standards and criteria to evaluate the institution's effectiveness in teaching and learning provision, research, and community engagement. These standards are designed to ensure that institutions meet minimum thresholds of quality while also aiming for continuous improvement. The definitions of criteria and standards are context specific. These definitions are influenced by the assessment or evaluation that is to be conducted, and the stakeholders involved in the process. Harvey (2004-25) defines criteria as 'the specification of elements against which a judgment is made'.

The ASG-QA defines a standard as 'the specification of aspects, elements or principles to which an institution, programme, higher education institution or quality assurance agency should conform or by which quality is judged' (ASG-QA, 2017, p.41). Criteria provide benchmarks for making judgements on the quality of activities in HEIs and must be agreed to by all HEIs (CHE, 2021).

The ASG-QA comprises standards and guidelines for internal and external QA in HE and provides an overarching framework for all QA processes. The ASG-QA should be used in conjunction with the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) which is designed to help institutions carry out self-evaluations (Oyewole, undated, p. 19). The standards and guidelines in the ASG-QA are adapted by HEIs and the QAAs for use in all review and evaluation activities and will inform the structure and format of the SER. For self-evaluation of programmes that are accredited by the QAA as well as professional bodies, the standards and criteria should reflect the requirements of both the QAA and the professional bodies.

The ASG-QA comprises three parts, of which Part A is relevant for HEIs. Part A relates to standards and guidelines for IQA in HEIs and specifies 13 standards. These standards and guidelines are adapted so that they are fit-for-purpose in an institution. For example, self-evaluation at the programme level requires criteria/standards and guidelines that take cognisance of whether the self-evaluation is in preparation for accreditation of a new programme, or whether it relates to a periodic, cyclical activity in relation to the IQA framework.



Preparation for accreditation of a new programme requires consideration of criteria/standards related to input and process factors, for example, vision and mission, programme design, student admission, staffing and staff development, student support, teaching and learning, assessment, facilities, and student information management. When periodic self-evaluation is conducted on an existing accredited programme, the criteria/standards take into consideration factors related to input, process, output, impact and review. Thus, additional criteria/standards will relate to student performance, progression and graduation, stakeholder feedback, and outcome of programme review, among others.

Criteria/standards for self-evaluation at an institutional level impact the whole institution and will include consideration of the following areas (adapted from ASG-QA, 2017; ESG, 2015): governance and leadership; curriculum and programme design; teaching and learning; assessment of student learning; student admission, progression, and graduation; research and scholarship; student satisfaction and engagement; infrastructure and resources; community engagement and social responsibility; sustainability and continuous improvement; and internationalization and global engagement.

Institutions should also consider the inclusion of additional elements into their IQA systems, for example, standards/criteria for relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Giller, 2023).

2.8 Quantitative and qualitative tools and metrics

A combination of quantitative and qualitative tools is used to monitor and /or assess quality. This includes peer reviews, feedback surveys¹⁴, focus group discussions, and KPIs. 'Indicators of quality lie along a spectrum from subjective/qualitative to objective/quantitative and both approaches have their place within the QA system overall' (Giller, 2023, p. 18).

2.8.1 Feedback mechanisms

Eliciting feedback from a wide range of stakeholders (i.e., students, alumni, and employers) ensures a holistic approach. Feedback from stakeholders facilitates the identification of trends over a period and indicates areas of good practice as well as areas for improvement. (Refer to Stakeholder Engagement which is covered in Module 1). Examples of student and other stakeholder feedback mechanisms are provided below.

A range of **student feedback surveys** are commonly used in HEIs, for example: course/module, and lecturer evaluations; graduate surveys; and student satisfaction/experience surveys. When designing survey questionnaires, it is important that the institution engages with the relevant stakeholders to ensure that the survey questionnaire is fit-for-purpose. It is not compulsory for students to complete and submit such surveys and often the response rate is not encouraging. Experience indicates that students want to feel valued and want their voices to be heard. Therefore, showing students that improvements are being implemented in response to the findings from a student survey encourages them to participate in these surveys. The institution needs to develop strategies on how it will encourage students' participation (example on the next page).

¹⁴ Refer to Pistor and Stammen (2017) for comprehensive information on designing survey questionnaires.

You SAID We DID

The institution embarks on a campus-wide information dissemination campaign on improvements that have been made. This is done electronically through the student portal. In addition, posters are printed and displayed in strategic areas. This approach is applicable at the institutional and programme levels. For example:

You SAID

There are insufficient computers.

The library is not open over the weekend.

We DID

The open-access computer lab has 10 new computers.

The library will be open on Saturdays from 10:00 to 16:00 and on Sundays from 11:30 to 14:00.

Employability surveys are designed to obtain feedback from alumni, employers and industry representatives on perceived graduate competency gaps and the employability of graduates.

Institutional climate surveys are surveys of staff and students regarding the overall effectiveness of the institution and the extent to which long-term goals are being met.

2.8.2 Key performance indicators (KPIs)

Key performance indicators (KPIs) are metrics¹⁵ that are used in self-evaluation to assess the degree to which performance targets have been achieved. Metrics in relation to the following KPIs can be obtained from the institutional system that is used to maintain student information¹⁶: graduation rates; research outputs and impact; teaching and learning; financial stability and resource allocation.

The following extract from the University of Johannesburg's SER provides information on their data definitions for metrics on excellence in teaching and learning (University of Johannesburg, 2009, p. 18) in relation to the goals of the university. Note that the institution is transparent in its endeavours and states that some metrics and sources of data are 'still to be developed':

¹⁵ Metrics are understood to be quantitative measures that are used for assessing, comparing, and tracking performance

¹⁶ The department responsible for managing student and institutional information provides reports to the institution at prescribed regular intervals, for example, at the end of every term/semester.

No.	KPI	Data definition of metrics	Source of data
1	Learning excellence	Degree credit success rate (FTE ¹⁷ passes divided by FTE enrolments in a given year)	HEMIS ¹⁸ data
2	Teaching excellence	Student satisfaction with UG ¹⁹ teaching	Extract from Student Experience Questionnaire
3	Relevance/ impact of programmes	Employability of graduates/ diplomates, excluding graduates who are not working or studying and cannot find employment	Job Destination Project, administered by the Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development
4	Quality of programme offerings	Still to be developed	

2.8.3 Use of technology and data analytics

Analytics tools that are embedded in learning management system (LMS) platforms such as *Blackboard*, or *Moodle*, can be used to monitor student engagement, progress, and performance. The development of institutional dashboards facilitates the tracking of key performance indicators, providing faculty and administrators with immediate feedback on performance.

At the University of Johannesburg, 'A key innovation in the operationalisation and the implementation of the Strategic Plan was the development of an Institutional Dashboard to monitor and communicate progress with the implementation of the Strategic Plan' (University of Johannesburg, 2009, p. 19). The institution's SER emphasises that in the development of a dashboard, there is a need to establish baseline data before determining targets.

2.8.4 Qualitative feedback

Focus group (FG) discussions and interviews are qualitative research methods that facilitate direct qualitative feedback from students, academic staff, and administrative staff about their experiences and can help identify strengths and weaknesses that are not captured through surveys alone. Both methods require compliance with the institution's policy and procedures on research ethics regarding issues of confidentiality, and recording of the interview, among others. These qualitative methods are not used on their own and usually complement quantitative feedback/data.

An FG typically comprises five to eight participants as a larger group will be difficult to manage and capturing the salient points of the discussion will be a challenge. This is a time-consuming methodology since more than one FG is necessary and a skilled facilitator is required. A recording of the discussion will facilitate the analysis and identification of themes. Limitations of FG discussions include facilitator bias, some voices dominating discussion, and challenges relating to capturing insights if permission has not been granted for recording the discussions.

¹⁷ FTE refers to full-time equivalent in the South African context

¹⁸ HEMIS refers to Higher Education Management Information System in the South African context

¹⁹ UG refers to undergraduate

Interviews are normally conducted individually and may be structured or unstructured. In a structured interview every participant is asked the same questions about the topic whereas in an unstructured interview participants respond to open-ended questions, and the interviewer asks follow-up questions based on the participants responses. Where an interview is digitally recorded (with permission), specialised software can be used to transcribe the interview. Interviews are an even more time-consuming method than FG considering the individualised nature of this method, transcription of the interview/s, and the analysis of the detailed interview transcript.

Activity: discussion and self-reflective questions

- Does your institution have a policy regarding student feedback? If so, what are the underpinning principles?
- Describe the student feedback mechanisms that are implemented in your institution.
- Who is responsible for implementing systems and processes for eliciting feedback from students?
- What strategies are used to disseminate information to students regarding the improvements that have been made/will be made in response to their feedback?
- What KPIs does your institution use?

Annex 1: Gap analysis tool

An example of the development of a gap analysis tool (adapted from Quality and Qualifications Ireland) using the ASG-QA **Standard 2: Governance and management**:

'The institution shall have clearly stated governance and management structures. This will ensure sound and ethical governance and management, including robust QA practices that support the achievement of its mission and legal mandate.' (ASG-QA, 2017, p.14)

Gap analysis question	Summarise the process already in place	What action is required?	Who is responsible for taking action?	By when?
1. Is there a document/ organogram that clarifies how QA processes are interrelated with the institution's governance and operational structures?				
2. Are there clear terms of reference/ responsibilities for all committees and individuals in this organogram?				
3. Is a budget allocated to QA for the roles and responsibilities identified? Is it adequate?				
4. Is it clear where responsibility for the QA system lies?				
5. Does the QA role have support from senior and executive management?				

NB: The questions above are not comprehensive and do not cover all aspects of the standard.

Annex 2: Example of the structure and format of an SER (aligned with the ASG-QA)

Institution details

1. Executive summary
2. Background and introduction
3. Overview of the IQA system and description of the process for development of the SER including stakeholder engagement and approval by the Senate
4. Governance and management including vision, mission and strategic objectives
5. Human resources
6. Financial resource management
7. Infrastructure and facilities
8. Student recruitment, admission, certification and support services
9. Design, approval, monitoring and evaluation of study programmes
10. Teaching, learning, and assessment
11. Research and innovation
12. Community engagements
13. Information management system
14. Public communication
15. Collaboration, staff and student mobility
16. Conclusion – emphasizing strengths, challenges and recommendations for improvement

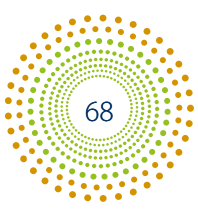


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Module 3

Quality Assurance in
Curriculum Design,
Development and Evaluation

Ana Maria Nhampule

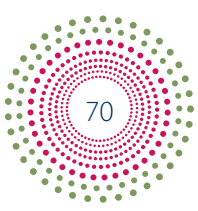


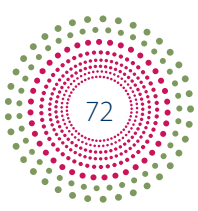
Table of Contents

Acronyms	71
3.1 Introduction	72
3.2 Learning Outcomes	72
3.3 Defining concepts related to curriculum, curriculum design, development and evaluation.....	72
3.3.1 Defining curriculum	73
3.3.2 Curriculum design, development and evaluation	74
3.3.3 Approaches to curriculum	75
3.4 Principles of curriculum design, development and evaluation aligned with quality assurance standards.....	77
3.5 Strategies for ensuring relevance, coherence, and alignment with learning outcomes.....	83
3.5.1 Strategies for ensuring relevance	83
3.5.2 Strategies for ensuring coherence	83
3.5.3 Strategies for ensuring alignment.....	84
3.5.4 What can quality managers (quality assurance unit) do to ensure constructive alignment?.....	85
3.6 Incorporating digital elements into curriculum design and development processes	86

Acronyms



ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
HAQAA	Harmonization of African Quality Assurance and Accreditation
HE	Higher Education
LMS	Learning Management Systems
RISDP	Southern African Development Community Regional Indicative Strategic Plan
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADC CATS	Southern African Development Community Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualification Framework
UGS	University of Global Studies



3.1 Introduction

This module aims to facilitate reflexive individual or group training on designing, developing and evaluating curricula, applying quality standards that can ensure its relevance, coherence and alignment with learning outcomes.

The concept of curriculum is multifaceted and can be seen as a comprehensive framework that guides educational practice. It is not just about the content taught but also the methods of teaching, the assessment practices, and the values and goals embedded in the educational system. A well-designed curriculum aims to foster holistic development, preparing learners for life and work in an ever-changing world. Recent discussions in educational reform highlight the need for curricula that prepare students for a rapidly changing, technology-driven world, focusing on skills like digital literacy, critical thinking, and adaptability.

Being reflexive in curriculum development and quality assurance (QA) is critical for several reasons, such as: adapting to changing needs, ensuring that the curriculum evolves with societal, cultural, technological, and industry changes and allowing educators to align teaching with real-world demands and learners' diverse needs; *continuous improvement*, enabling systematic improvements over time; inclusivity and equity, ensuring that the curriculum supports equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of background; and critical engagement, encouraging educators and learners to think critically about the content, methodologies, and learning outcomes, leading to more thoughtful and impactful education.

As this module is intended to be practical and to guide users toward reflexive action on quality assurance in curriculum design, development and evaluation, all parts integrate some activities that can be taken by users individually or in groups, adjusting the discussion to their own context.

3.2 Learning Outcomes

- Discuss the concepts related to curriculum, curriculum design, development and evaluation;
- Analyse a programme or course by applying concepts related to curriculum, curriculum design, development and evaluation;
- Apply principles of curriculum design, development and evaluation that are aligned with quality assurance standards;
- Reflect on the institutional or faculty needs to consolidate the strategies for ensuring curriculum relevance, coherence and alignment with learning outcomes;
- Recognize the importance of incorporating digital elements into curriculum design and development processes.

3.3 Defining concepts related to curriculum, curriculum design, development and evaluation

Group or individual reflections

Before reading, take some time to reflect on:

- What is curriculum?
- What are curriculum design, development and evaluation about?

3.3.1 Defining curriculum

The term curriculum originates from the Latin word *curriculum*, meaning 'a race' or 'the course of a race', reflecting the idea of a planned sequence of learning experiences. Curriculum encompasses the entirety of student experiences within the learning process. It refers to the structured set of educational experiences, content, and learning activities that are planned and organized by educators to guide students' learning within and beyond the institution. It includes the subjects, topics, lessons, and materials that are taught, as well as the goals, objectives, and assessments used to measure students' progress.

In this sense, curriculum is a product in different dimensions:

- i. Intended curriculum**, a written, formal document that is comprehensive and user-friendly. It is designed as a result of stakeholder engagement and collaborative decisions, translating an idea into a written plan (Supriani et al., 2022).

The intended curriculum is a systematic and intentional description of *what*, *why*, *how*, and *how well* students should learn to become competent. This articulates the curriculum visions, based on the common understanding of the education mission and related concepts such as learning outcomes, goals, content, assessment, resources, environment, time, stakeholders, roles, activities, and methods.

In higher education (HE), the intended curriculum refers to the organized set of courses, programmes, and learning experiences that the institution offers to students. It outlines the knowledge, skills, and competencies students are expected to gain throughout their academic journey.

The curriculum in higher education typically includes:

- **Core courses:** These are the required courses that all students in a particular programme must take to build foundational knowledge in their field of study (e.g., mathematics, sciences, humanities).
- **Elective courses:** These allow students to choose from a range of subjects outside the core courses, offering the flexibility to explore different areas of interest.
- **Specialization or concentration:** Some programmes may offer specialized tracks or concentrations that allow students to focus on a particular area of their field, such as marketing within a business degree or molecular biology within a biology degree.
- **General education requirements:** Many institutions include a set of courses that ensure students receive a well-rounded education, covering areas like writing, mathematics, social sciences, and humanities, regardless of their major.
- **Capstone projects or theses:** Some programmes require students to complete a final project, thesis, or dissertation that demonstrates their ability to apply what they have learned in a real-world or research context.

The curriculum is designed to ensure that students meet specific learning outcomes or competencies by the time they complete their programme, such as critical thinking, research skills, and professional preparation.

- ii. Implemented or enacted curriculum relates** to what students learn and can be demonstrated through learning outcomes.

The implemented curriculum is the result of the interpretation of the intended curriculum and the experience of the actors who implement it.

The implemented curriculum can differ from the intended curriculum due to various factors, such as teacher interpretation, student needs, available resources, time constraints, and institutional policies. While the intended curriculum sets the framework, the implemented curriculum reflects the dynamic and practical application of that framework in real educational settings.

iii. Attained curriculum corresponds to the result of the learning process that students can demonstrate.

As the students follow the implemented curriculum, they can act and apply the learning outcomes (knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competencies, or behaviours) to promote wellbeing and human flourishing.

iv. Hidden curriculum represents the unintended values, and beliefs of students, teachers and communities.

The hidden curriculum represents the unexpected impact of the curriculum. It can include the physical environment of the institution, the way in which the teaching and learning process is planned and organized, and the relationship between academic communities.

3.3.2 Curriculum design, development and evaluation

Curriculum design and evaluation are stages of a cyclical process of curriculum development that starts with needs assessment and includes implementation and quality assurance as shown in the following diagram.

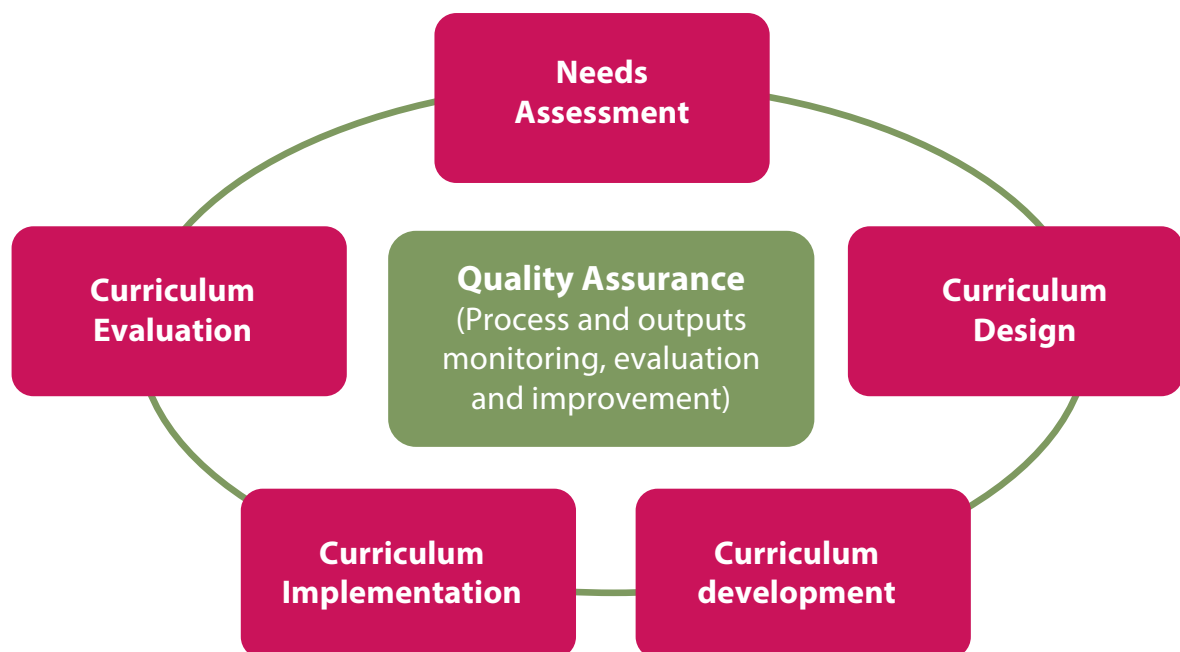


Figure 1: Cyclical process of curriculum development

Needs assessment or analyses corresponds to the preparation stage of curriculum development in which research is conducted to assess the needs for learning.

The analysis is made considering the context in which a curriculum is developed (institutional, local, national, regional, continental and global), the mission of education, the institutional vision and mission, general and specific expectations, current capabilities of students, requirements, stakeholders, and other relevant information.

Curriculum design refers to the process of organizing a structured framework or an outline of the learning and teaching process. Using the information from the analysis, in this stage general learning standards are set up, such as learning outcomes, objectives, delivery strategies, and assessment. Curriculum design corresponds to the decision-making on the educational approach to be adopted (subject-centred, learner-centred or critical/transformatory). The output is a basic roadmap overview of the programme or course.

Curriculum development is the stage in which the programme or course is developed according to the decisions made during the previous phase of design. The focus of this stage is to determine how the programme or course

designed will be delivered. The outputs in this stage include the materials needed to promote the intended learning outcomes. This stage could include a pilot session where pilot testing is conducted to reinforce the benchmarking. The result of curriculum design and development is a framework that serves as a blueprint that includes the purpose of the teaching and learning process, the goals, what students should learn to fulfil that purpose, how they can learn and the learning outcomes they should achieve at different educational stages.

Curriculum implementation is the stage in which the course is offered. During this stage the implementation tools are put in place and observation is made to ensure that the intended curriculum is put into practice and desired learning outcomes are gradually achieved.

Curriculum evaluation is the stage of awareness of the results of the overall process as well as the awareness of the curriculum development process. Curriculum evaluation is the process of assessing the effectiveness and impact of a curriculum. This involves reviewing whether the curriculum is meeting its intended learning outcomes, adapting to changes in society, and ensuring that it remains relevant, innovative, and effective in preparing students for the future. Evaluation also includes gathering feedback from teachers, students, and other stakeholders to identify areas for improvement, maintaining the process of teaching and learning aligned with the latest educational standards. Although it is a stage in the cyclical process of curriculum development, it occurs in all stages to ensure that the purposes of each stage are achieved and all decisions made are consistent.

Evaluation as part of curriculum development is an important component of quality assurance. There are standards that help institutions to benchmark and ensure that their curriculum and the curriculum development process are consistent with the institutional, national, regional, continental and global principles on curriculum development and education. The evaluation process can include self-evaluation and external (peer) review.

Curriculum design, development and evaluation involve various stakeholders, such as education experts in curriculum development and pedagogy, subject matter experts, academic and non-academic staff, other experts, including technical writers, graphic designers, computer programmers, students, graduates, professional boards, industry employers, regulators and other segments of society at large. Curriculum design, development and evaluation are critical as the blueprint that results from this process is essential in guiding teachers and students to ensure that the learning process is coherent, relevant and aligned with the intended learning outcomes. This blueprint also contributes to effective teaching and learning, the systematic development of competencies and assessment of students' progress, and guarantees that education allows expected learning outcomes for students.

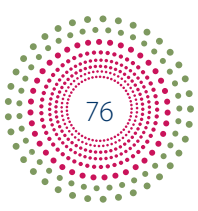
Following this cycle, the curriculum is regularly reviewed and updated to keep it aligned with evolving knowledge, research, technology, and industry standards. In higher education, it also aligns with accreditation standards and prepares students for careers or advanced study. For more information on regular review or curriculum innovation, refer to Supriani et al. (2022).

3.3.3 Approaches to curriculum

The concepts related to curriculum have been interpreted through various theoretical frameworks, each of them offering unique perspectives on its purpose and design. These approaches range from traditional, content-focused models to progressive approaches such as learner-centred and critical or transformative approaches.

Traditional or subject-centred approach emphasizes the systematic transmission of knowledge, focusing on core subjects and content mastery. It is grounded in the belief that certain bodies of knowledge are essential for all students.

Related to this perspective, curriculum is defined as a plan for teaching and learning. It describes the learning objectives students are expected to meet; courses to be offered; units and lessons to be taught in each course; assignments and projects to be given to students, materials, and assessments.



In addition, studies on curriculum adopt a descriptive approach focusing on analysing and documenting the existing curriculum as it is taught in educational settings. This method involves collecting data on the content delivered, teaching strategies employed, and assessment methods used. The goal is to understand the current state of curriculum implementation, identify any discrepancies between planned and enacted curricula, and inform potential improvements. Curriculum mapping is a technique associated with this approach, where educators record and review the curriculum's components to ensure alignment and coherence.

The learner-centred approach advocated by educators like John Dewey prioritizes the interests, experiences, and needs of the learner. It promotes active, experiential learning where students engage with the curriculum through hands-on activities and critical thinking. Dewey (1916) emphasized that education should not only impart knowledge but also prepare students for democratic participation and social reform (Pezzano, 2017).

Dewey (1916) also argued that children learn better when they interact with their environment and are involved in the school's learning plan. He contended that, for education to be truly effective, children must be exposed to learning opportunities that enable them to link current knowledge to prior experiences and knowledge. He also recommends an interdisciplinary curriculum, focusing on connecting multiple subjects in a learning situation in which students can freely work, walking in and out of classrooms.

Related to this approach, other different approaches emerged like the critical transformative approach, proposed by Paraskeva (2016) as the itinerant curriculum theory advocating for a curriculum that is adaptable and sensitive to diverse cultural, historical, and political contexts.

Paraskeva (2016) proposes a progressive framework for understanding curriculum as a constant movement through theorizing beyond established boundaries. It is rooted in the complex socio-political landscape and embraces non-linear, decolonial, and cosmopolitan perspectives, challenging traditional paradigms of knowledge and education. This perspective views the curriculum as a tool for social change, encouraging students to question and challenge societal norms and injustices. It emphasizes critical thinking and the development of a consciousness that seeks to transform society.

In view of student-centred approaches, curriculum is a plan for teaching and learning. Students and all other stakeholders are engaged to decide on the type of curriculum to be designed through sufficient consensus, considering the intended curriculum as a dynamic and multifaceted framework that guides educational experiences, aiming to equip students with knowledge, skills, and values necessary for their personal and societal contributions.

Considering curriculum as a plan for teaching and learning, studies on curriculum are based on an operational approach, driven by the achievement of learning outcomes. The focus of curriculum studies is on what is expected to be achieved by learners at the end of a learning process. Thus, curriculum is analysed as the totality of students' experiences that occur in an educational process within the classroom and outside the classroom. This approach is concerned with the effective implementation and execution of the curriculum for the diverse needs of learners, incorporating both planned instruction and the varied experiences students encounter.

A learner-centred curriculum is more dynamic and prioritises integration and interdisciplinary learning, it values learning flexibility and aims to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that can be applied to real-world situations. This approach enhances students' motivation and personalised learning. However, it poses challenges for continuous teacher training because of its complexity of implementation and the need to maintain consistency with the learning outcomes.

Group or individual reflections

After reading, are there any changes in your previous perceptions about:

- What is curriculum?
- What are curriculum design, development and evaluation about?

If there are changes in your previous perceptions, highlight the lessons learnt and register how your current perceptions can influence changes on curriculum design, development and evaluation in your institution or faculty.

For this exercise choose a programme offered by your institution or faculty and highlight concrete examples of what is now in place and what could change according to the discussed concepts on curriculum, curriculum design, development and evaluation.

3.4 Principles of curriculum design, development and evaluation aligned with quality assurance standards

The discussion about the principles to ensure alignment of curriculum design, development and evaluation with QA standards calls for consideration of institutional, national, regional, continental and international QA standards to ensure that the curriculum will not only meet educational and accreditation requirements but also support student learning, engagement, and success in a meaningful and sustainable way.

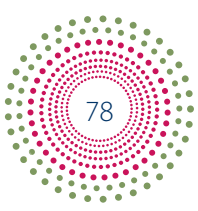
African institutions can refer, for example, to the *African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ASG-QA), 'Part A: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance' to determine the principles that apply to their curriculum design, development and evaluation process. Two standards are particularly salient:

Standard 7: *Design, approval, monitoring and evaluation of study Programmes:* 'The institution shall have policies and systems that ensure the design and development, monitoring and evaluation of quality, relevant study programmes that are learning outcomes-based and aligned with the needs of stakeholders; and that contribute to the achievement of its mission, and are commensurate with national, regional and international standards' (HAQAA Initiative, 2018, pp. 19-21).

Standard 8: *Teaching, learning and assessment:* 'The institution shall put in place, in a way that is consistent with its vision and mission, policies and procedures that promote learning and acquisition of appropriate knowledge, competencies and skills; and assure fair and transparent assessment based on student-centred assessment. The assessment principles, standards and procedures are explicit and made available publicly to both students and staff' (HAQAA Initiative, 2018, pp. 21-22).

Those standards inspire principles of curriculum design, development and evaluation that focus on ensuring that the curriculum meets both national, regional, continental and international expectations while being contextually relevant. These principles are designed to create a curriculum that not only promotes academic excellence but also fosters holistic development for students.

The Users' Guide for the ASG-QA describes each standard and guideline and presents the focus points or guiding questions and examples of good practice or evidence for each guideline (HAQAA 2, 2023). This tool can be used by institutions and faculties to ensure quality of the process and outcomes of curriculum design, development and evaluation.



Curriculum development in an institution or faculty, aligned with quality assurance standards, ensures that academic programmes are structured to provide high-quality education that meets both academic goals and industry or societal needs.

Here is a breakdown of the key principles of curriculum design, development and evaluation aligned with African quality assurance standards:

i. Contextual relevance and cultural sensitivity

The curriculum should be culturally relevant and tailored to the unique social, political, economic, and environmental contexts of African countries. This principle calls for the alignment of the curriculum with national and African history, languages, and traditions including values, worldviews, and the African renaissance agenda. This helps students understand their identity and heritage in a way that reflects diversity and promotes social cohesion.

Learning experiences and learning outputs are directly applicable to the students' experiences and aspirations, and they are connected to the real-world context.

ii. Inclusivity and equity

Curriculum development should promote inclusive education, ensuring equal access for all students, including those with disabilities, girls, marginalized groups, and people in rural or remote areas. In this sense, institutions and faculty are called to ensure equal representation of all groups, providing equitable learning opportunities, and removing barriers to learning for all students, including those from vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.

iii. Curriculum flexibility and adaptability

A curriculum should be flexible and adaptable to meet the changing needs of society, emerging technologies, and global developments. Its implementation should be dynamic, with room for innovation in pedagogical approaches, integration of technology, and sustainable development issues. Institutions and faculties should regularly review and update curricula to keep pace with changes in the global educational landscape while ensuring alignment with national educational goals.

iv. Learner-centredness

The curriculum should be designed to prioritize the learner's needs, experiences, and interests, focusing on fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning skills. In this sense, it could emphasize experiential learning, critical reflection, and active engagement in learning, preparing students for practical challenges in their communities. Teaching and learning strategies that are learner-centred ensure that assessment practices reflect students' actual understanding and abilities.

v. Integration of competencies and skills development

The curriculum should be competency-based, emphasizing the development of practical skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities for real-life application. It focuses on practical skills that align with the demands of local and global labour markets, including technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial skills. The curriculum includes measurable learning outcomes that focus on practical competencies and employability, linking education to the labour market and social development.

Mulenga (2020) proposes that aligning curriculum development with 21st century competencies in Africa involves rethinking educational frameworks to prepare students for a rapidly evolving world.

The curriculum should be academically rigorous, promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. It should be challenging but achievable, ensuring students reach the appropriate academic level by the end of the programme.

vi. Holistic development

The curriculum should contribute to the development of students in intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical aspects. It should ensure personal development, including leadership, responsibility, teamwork, and civic engagement through activities, projects, and learning experiences that support students' emotional, social, and ethical development.

vii. Stakeholder engagement and participation

Curriculum development should be a participatory process, involving a wide range of stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, employers, professional bodies, and the wider community. The institution should conduct regular consultations with stakeholders to gather input on curriculum changes, ensuring that it reflects the needs and aspirations of the local communities and indigenous groups and reflects local knowledge and values. The aim of curriculum development as a social construct is to prepare students for the challenges of the future while also addressing diverse student needs and societal needs.

viii. Alignment with national, regional and African continental educational goals

Curriculum development should align with the educational policies, national development plans, regional goals, such as those outlined in the SADC Regional Vision 2050 and the Indicative Strategic Plan 2020-2030 (RISDP) and continental goals, such as those outlined in the African Union's Agenda 2063. Curriculum development should also align with the national frameworks for education and must be consistent with regional education frameworks, such as the SADC Qualification Framework (SADCQF) and SADC Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (SADC CATS).

Alignment of a curriculum with the SADCQF refers to the process of ensuring that educational programmes and qualifications meet the standards and guidelines set by the SADCQF. This framework is designed to harmonize qualifications across Member States of the SADC region, promote mutual recognition of qualifications, and facilitate the mobility of learners and workers within the region. Following the alignment principle, the institution or faculty regularly aligns curriculum objectives with national, regional and African continental educational standards and strategic goals to ensure consistency and coherence in the educational system.

ix. Consistency and coherence

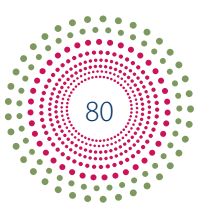
Curriculum development ensures that the curriculum is internally consistent, with courses building upon each other. The sequence of courses and content should provide a logical progression of knowledge and skills. Regular review and evaluation ensure that the curriculum provides a coherent learning pathway that aligns with the programme's learning outcomes. Consistency and coherence also include linkage with the institutional mission, vision and values, which are aligned with the national policies, regional and continental initiatives for harmonization of HE, and global trends on curriculum development and education.

x. Assessment for learning

Assessment should be integrated into the learning process, providing feedback that guides learners toward continuous improvement. Institutions or faculty use assessment methods that are diverse, including formative assessments, peer evaluations, and self-assessments, with a focus on understanding rather than rote learning. Assessment frameworks should be transparent, fair, and aligned with the learning outcomes and competencies specified in the curriculum.

xi. Sustainability and capacity building

The process of curriculum design and implementation should be sustainable, with continuous professional development for teachers to ensure high-quality delivery. Institutions or faculties should promote continuous professional development and investment to ensure that teachers are well-equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to implement the curriculum effectively. It is also important to ensure that institutions or faculties are adequately resourced and have support for the ongoing development of curriculum standards.



xii. Quality monitoring and evaluation

The institution or faculty establishes a mechanism for regular review and evaluation of the curriculum, including input from faculty, students, and external reviewers. Quality monitoring and evaluation include data analysis on student performance, graduation rates, and other relevant metrics to identify areas for improvement. More information on national, regional and continental frameworks for quality assurance is in Module 5 of this handbook.

This process also includes benchmarking, allowing comparison of the curriculum with other institutions or recognized programmes in the same field to ensure competitiveness and relevance. Comparing curriculum development processes and outputs in each stage with other internal, national, regional, continental and international good practices provide opportunities for improvement of the curriculum and for quality enhancement of the processes.

Networks and communication are key for benchmarking. In curriculum development, it can help to identify gaps and new approaches for improvements. It can also help to overcome resistance to change and can demonstrate to stakeholders that the institution or faculty is acting according to worldwide developments.

In summary, aligning curriculum development, design, and evaluation with standards for quality assurance requires a holistic, inclusive, and culturally relevant approach that reflects students' unique needs, challenges, and aspirations while promoting equity, sustainability, and competitiveness.

By adhering to these principles, an institution or faculty can develop a curriculum that not only meets the needs of students and stakeholders but also complies with national, regional, continental and international quality assurance standards, leading to high academic and professional standards. Regular evaluation and feedback loops are essential to maintaining the curriculum's relevance, rigour, and quality.

Group or individual reflections

1. Above are presented twelve principles of curriculum design, development and evaluation aligned with quality assurance standards. Reflect on the implementation of those principles in your institution or faculty and respond to the following questions:
 - Which of those principles do you consider implemented and good practices in your institution or faculty?
 - Which of those principles are urgent to address as challenging your institution or faculty?
 - Is your opinion about your institution or faculty consistent with the opinion of other stakeholders? If not, mention some differences and reflect on how to address the challenging differences.
2. What are the national policies, frameworks, strategies and tools that are in place to regulate curriculum development in your country? What are the institutional norms, frameworks and tools for curriculum development?
3. To what extent are the national policies and institutional norms for curriculum development aligned with the learner-centred and critical or transformative approaches? How can they be improved?
4. Read the hypothetical case study and discuss with your colleague about:
 - Does the background of University of Global Studies (UGS) in this case reveal any situation that is similar to your institution or faculty?
 - Is there any possibility for your institution or faculty to implement an initiative aimed to aligning the curriculum with quality assurance standards? What could be easy to implement? What challenges do you anticipate? How could your institution or faculty address the challenges?

Case Study: University of Global Studies - Curriculum Alignment and Accreditation Process**Background**

The University of Global Studies (UGS) offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Over the years, students have expressed concerns about the curriculum's relevance to industry standards, and some faculty members have voiced the need for greater coherence between the intended learning outcomes and course delivery.

Quality assurance focus

UGS implemented a comprehensive curriculum review process aimed at aligning the curriculum with accreditation standards and industry expectations. The primary objectives were to ensure that courses aligned with their learning outcomes, fostered student engagement, and provided skills that met the demands of employers.

QA process

Curriculum Mapping: UGS conducted a full curriculum mapping exercise across all programmes, linking course content with learning outcomes. This helped to identify areas where certain topics were either overemphasized or underrepresented.

Stakeholder Involvement: The university invited feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including faculty, students, alumni, and industry experts. This ensured that the curriculum was relevant and aligned with real-world applications.

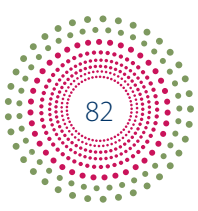
Internal and External Review: UGS established a curriculum committee that included faculty from multiple departments and external accreditors who reviewed the curriculum every three years. The external reviewers helped to ensure that the curriculum met national and international standards.

Outcomes

The curriculum was revised to include more hands-on learning experiences, industry-based projects, and updated content in line with technological advancements.

Accreditation was renewed, and the curriculum received positive feedback from employers who noted the enhanced employability of graduates.

The university implemented a system for continuous curriculum review based on ongoing feedback from all stakeholders.



3.5 Strategies for ensuring relevance, coherence, and alignment with learning outcomes

Ensuring relevance, coherence, and alignment in curriculum development is crucial for providing an effective, meaningful, and impactful educational experience. Here are strategies for achieving these key principles:

3.5.1 Strategies for ensuring relevance

Relevance ensures that the curriculum meets the needs, interests, and future aspirations of students while addressing real-world issues and challenges. Relevance could be addressed by:

Contextualization of content: Design the curriculum to reflect the cultural, historical, social, and economic context of the learners. This includes integrating local issues, regional challenges, and global trends that are relevant to the students' lives.

Example: In an African context, a curriculum might include content on sustainable development, African history, indigenous knowledge, and current challenges like climate change or digital transformation.

Mpuangnan and Ntombela (2023) demonstrate that community-based knowledge is relevant in facilitating curriculum development through approaches like community engagement and community needs assessment. They demonstrate that community engagement enhanced curriculum quality, learner engagement, and educational outcomes.

Stakeholder engagement: Involve a broad range of stakeholders (faculty, students, parents, community leaders, employers) in the curriculum development process to ensure it reflects the needs of the community and the labour market.

Example: Surveys, focus groups, or consultations with industry professionals can ensure that curriculum aligns with the skills and knowledge required in the job market.

Aligning with national and regional goals: Ensure that the curriculum aligns with national educational standards or policies, and development goals, as well as regional frameworks, such as the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA).

Example: In Africa, aligning the curriculum with the African Union Agenda 2063 or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ensures relevance to broader socio-economic development goals.

Incorporating contemporary issues: Incorporate contemporary global and local issues, such as climate change, technology, gender equality, or entrepreneurship, to make learning more applicable to current and future societal needs.

Example: Including topics like digital literacy, renewable energy, or entrepreneurship fosters students' readiness to face emerging global challenges.

3.5.2 Strategies for ensuring coherence

Coherence refers to the logical, systematic, and connected structure of the curriculum that enables students to build upon what they have learned in a progressive and connected manner. This can be achieved by the following strategies:

Clear learning outcomes and progression: Define clear, measurable learning outcomes for each level or course. Ensure that learning builds progressively from one level to the next.

Example: In a science curriculum, ensure that foundational topics like basic principles of physics are covered in early grades, followed by more complex concepts such as thermodynamics or quantum mechanics at higher levels.

Interdisciplinary approach: Foster connections between different subjects to create a holistic learning experience. Interdisciplinary learning encourages students to see how various knowledge areas are interconnected.

Example: The integration of subjects like environmental science, economics, and social studies to address issues such as sustainable development.

Logical sequence and structuring: Organize content in a logical sequence, ensuring that topics flow in a way that builds on prior knowledge. Avoid redundancy or unnecessary repetition of topics.

Example: Mathematics curricula can follow a sequence where students first learn arithmetic before progressing to algebra, geometry, calculus, and so on.

Teacher collaboration and professional development: Foster collaboration among educators across different disciplines to ensure that content is presented consistently and coherently. This also includes providing teachers with regular professional development on curriculum alignment and good practices.

Example: Regular meetings where teachers of different subjects (maths, science, language arts) align their teaching strategies and share resources.

3.5.3 Strategies for ensuring alignment

Alignment ensures that all components of the curriculum, including content, instruction, assessment, and resources, are working together to achieve the desired learning outcomes (Alfauzan and Tarchouna, 2017).

Biggs (2003) defined the coordination of expected learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and assessment as *Constructive Alignment* and argues that the word constructive refers to the way of learning and what the learner does, and the word alignment refers to what the teacher does. Hence, the basic idea of constructive alignment is to coordinate teaching and learning activities and assessment methods in such a way that they support student learning to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

Below are presented some strategies for curriculum alignment:

Alignment with learning outcomes: Ensure that all components of the curriculum, including content, teaching methods, and assessments, are aligned with the intended learning outcomes.

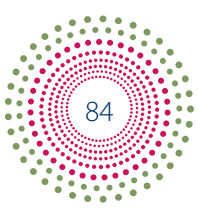
Example: If the learning outcome for a geography course is for students to understand climate change, then the curriculum should provide content on environmental science, and the assessment should evaluate their understanding of the causes and impacts of climate change.

Alignment between curriculum and assessment: Design assessments that directly measure the achievement of the curriculum's learning outcomes. This ensures that assessments are not only relevant but also fair and effective in evaluating students' progress.

Example: If a curriculum emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking, then assessments should include open-ended questions, projects, or case studies that allow students to demonstrate these skills, rather than just rote memorization.

Consistency in teaching approaches: Ensure that teaching methods align with the curriculum goals. Active learning strategies, such as project-based learning or group discussions, should be used when the curriculum emphasizes critical thinking and collaboration.

Example: A curriculum that emphasizes teamwork and collaboration should integrate cooperative learning strategies into teaching methods, such as group projects, peer teaching, and collaborative research.



Continuous review and feedback loops: Regularly evaluate and revise the curriculum to ensure alignment with evolving educational standards, student needs, and societal changes. Incorporate feedback from educators, students, and external stakeholders.

Example: Implement a process of curriculum review every few years or after each academic cycle to ensure that content, teaching strategies, and assessments remain aligned with the goals and remain relevant.

Utilizing technology and resources: Ensure that technology and resources are aligned with curriculum objectives to support learning. This includes the use of digital tools, multimedia, and online platforms that enhance the learning experience.

Example: A curriculum focused on coding and digital literacy should be supported with resources such as coding software, interactive platforms, and tutorials to align with the learning outcomes.

In summary, to ensure relevance, coherence, and alignment in a curriculum, institutions and faculties must take a holistic and strategic approach. By actively engaging stakeholders, structuring content logically, aligning teaching with assessment, and continuously reviewing the curriculum, educators can create a dynamic and effective learning experience that prepares students for the demands of the future.

To succeed in implementing strategies to ensure relevance, coherence, and constructive alignment in a curriculum, institutions and faculties need strong leadership and strategic communication that could build stakeholders' commitment based on shared principles, vision and values on education and curriculum development. It also calls for strong commitment to quality and quality culture, experts' engagement, and transparency and articulation to ensure visibility of the learning trajectory in the curriculum for all stakeholders.

For lecturers' activities, we can summarise three basic tasks for constructive alignment of a course: clearly define learning outcomes; choose assessment methods that are able to assess the expected learning outcomes; and select teaching and learning strategies that are likely to prepare for the assessment and with it to ensure that the learning outcomes are achieved (Kennedy et al., 2006, p. 22).

3.5.4 What can quality managers (quality assurance unit) do to ensure constructive alignment?

Assuming that it is the lecturers who are responsible for teaching and learning because they know best, to ensure constructive alignment, quality managers can still play a supporting role to them. For example, quality managers can:

- Ensure information flows concerning internal and external (national, regional, continental and international) standards and requirements that are considered in assessment procedures or when grading students' performance.
- Make sure that lecturers make their grading schemes transparent to the students.
- Ask good questions and find out about inconsistencies between different grading schemes at a faculty or between faculties and help to close these gaps.
- Support lecturers in linking assessment methods and teaching and learning strategies appropriately to achieve the expected learning outcome. For example, they can provide a table matrix, in which lecturers can write down the expected learning outcomes.
- Advise on the appropriate teaching and learning strategies and assessment techniques, following the new trends in education and curriculum development.
- Offer information about possible assessment formats and teaching and learning strategies.

To be able to do so, quality managers need a basic understanding and knowledge of assessment techniques, how to grade students' performance and the multiple possibilities of teaching and learning strategies that can be used to facilitate students' learning.

3.6 Incorporating digital elements into curriculum design and development processes

Incorporating digital elements into curriculum design and development processes can greatly enhance learning experiences by making them more engaging, interactive, and accessible. Here are some ways to achieve this effectively:

Identifying digital tools and resources

Choose tools that align with the curriculum objectives, such as educational apps, online platforms, or virtual labs. Incorporate multimedia elements like videos, animations, and simulations to cater to various learning styles.

The article 'Development and assessment of a curriculum model for virtual simulation in nursing: curriculum development and pilot-evaluation' presents a study aimed at developing virtual simulation in nursing education. It also includes the evaluation of the developed model (Shin and Rim, 2023).

Integrating e-learning platforms

Utilize Learning Management Systems (LMS) to organize course materials, assignments, and communication, and design online modules that include quizzes, interactive activities, and discussion forums.

Promoting digital literacy

Include lessons that teach students how to use digital tools responsibly and effectively and build activities where students research, collaborate, and present using digital platforms.

Embracing Blended Learning

Combine traditional teaching methods with digital elements like flipped classrooms or hybrid models, using digital tools to complement face-to-face interactions, such as online assessments and feedback systems.

Personalizing Learning Through Technology

Incorporate adaptive learning technologies that tailor content to individual needs, and allow students to explore content at their own pace using online resources.

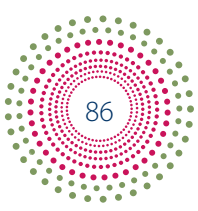
Continuous Improvement and Training

Train educators in using digital tools effectively in curriculum delivery, and regularly review and update digital resources based on feedback and technological advancements.

Collection and data analyses for decision making on curriculum development and quality assurance

Curriculum ontology refers to a structured way of organizing and describing the relationships between various components within an educational curriculum. In essence, it's a framework that defines concepts, categories, and their interconnections, allowing educators, researchers, and systems to better understand, manage, and share curriculum information.

Using curriculum ontology, you might define relationships between subjects or disciplines, topics and subtopics within each subject, educational objectives, learning outcomes, resources, and assessment methods.



Such ontology is often used in fields like education technology to develop learning platforms, align curricula across institutions, or create personalized learning pathways for students. It also supports interoperability between systems by ensuring that curriculum components are uniformly described.

The article 'An alternative approach to ontology-based curriculum development in higher education' presents a generic schema of curriculum ontology and demonstrates a usable approach for analysing general curriculum (Piriyaongripat et al., 2024).

In summary, by thoughtfully embedding these digital elements, curriculum development can better prepare students for a technology-driven world while keeping learning dynamic and inclusive.

Group or individual reflections

- How can technology be integrated into curriculum design and development in your institution or faculty?
- How can digital tools enhance the learning experience?
- What challenges might you face in incorporating technology, and how can they be overcome?

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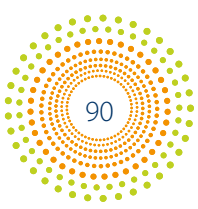
Module 4

Quality Assurance in Digital Transformation

Connie Mitchell

Table of Contents

Acronyms.....	90
4.1 Introduction	91
4.2 Learning outcomes	92
4.3 Key concepts/Definitions	92
4.4 Digital transformation and quality assurance	94
4.5 The role of leadership and governance in overseeing digital transformation initiatives.....	95
4.6 Tips on Implementation Strategies	96
4.7 Quality assurance considerations for online learning platforms, digital resources, and educational technology tools.....	96
4.8 The Crossroads of QA and Digital Transformation.....	97
4.9 Case studies in quality assurance	98
4.10 Striking a balance: navigating the opportunities and risks of AI and DT in higher education.....	99
4.11 Conclusions	102



Acronyms

AI Artificial Intelligence

DT Digital Transformation

GEN AI Generative Artificial Intelligence

HEI Higher Education Institution

KPI Key Performance Indicator

LMS Learning Management System

QA Quality Assurance

SMART Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound



4.1 Introduction

This training module is intended to equip higher education professionals with the knowledge and skills to implement Digital Transformation (DT) initiatives that enhance institutional operations, teaching, learning, and quality assurance (QA) practices. Participants will explore good practices, case studies, and strategic frameworks to drive sustainable change in their institutions.

DT refers to the process of integrating digital technologies into all aspects of business operations to change how organizations operate and fundamentally deliver value to customers. Quality assurance testing plays a pivotal role in accelerating digital transformation initiatives by ensuring the reliability, performance, and security of digital solutions. QA in digital transformation encompasses a range of activities aimed at identifying defects, validating functionality, and verifying compliance with business requirements.

How does this happen in higher education?

- In higher education, DT has become more prevalent after the pandemic. Developing the infrastructure and quality assurance measures is an important step in this transformation.
- Elements of quality transformation are automated processes, optimized operating models, faster delivery, self-diagnostic and self-healing systems, and in-process quality enablement.

The use of technology radically improves an organization's performance and efficiency and supports online teaching and learning practices in higher education. It is recommended that the reasons behind the digital transformation be considered to establish clear objectives and outcomes.

Key points to be covered in this module include:

- QA considerations for online learning platforms, digital resources, and educational technology tools.
- Strategies for ensuring the quality and integrity of digital learning experiences.
- Case studies showcasing effective quality assurance practices in digital transformation initiatives.

This document explores key strategies, case studies, and good practices for implementing DT while upholding quality standards in higher education.

Quality Assurance in Digital Transformation

DT plays a pivotal role in reshaping organizational processes to achieve diverse objectives, including improving productivity, enhancing customer experiences, ensuring governance and compliance, gaining a competitive advantage, increasing agility, boosting revenue, and reducing operational costs (Westerman et al., 2014; Berman, 2012). To accomplish these objectives, organizations must integrate key components such as innovation, collaboration, strategy and leadership, operational excellence, employee empowerment, infrastructure modernization, advanced technologies, and robust information systems and insights (Vial, 2019; Kane et al., 2015). Innovation drives the creation of novel solutions that address challenges and open new opportunities, while collaboration fosters teamwork across departments to achieve shared goals. Strong leadership and strategic vision are essential for aligning transformation initiatives with long-term objectives (Henriette et al., 2015). Infrastructure modernization and the adoption of cutting-edge technologies enhance efficiency and scalability while empowering employees with digital skills, ensuring workforce readiness (Kane et al., 2015). Furthermore, effective information systems and actionable insights enable data-driven decision-making, allowing organizations to adapt to dynamic market conditions and thrive in competitive landscapes (Vial, 2019). By harmonizing these components with clear objectives, organizations can unlock the full potential of digital transformation.

Digital transformation integrates digital technology into all institutional areas, fundamentally changing operations, value delivery, and strategic goals. Digital transformation allows institutions to adapt their infrastructure to embed the

use of digital tools throughout all systems. It is clear that higher education institutions (HEIs) must incorporate rigorous quality assurance measures to maintain the credibility of online learning platforms, digital resources, and educational technology tools (Brown et al., 2021). Ensuring compliance with governance and regulatory frameworks enhances institutional reputation and trust (Garrison, 2022).

Key strategies for QA:

- Establishing clear digital learning policies and guidelines.
- Implementing data security and compliance measures.
- Providing continuous faculty and student training.
- Regularly assessing and updating digital tools based on performance metrics (Smith, 2023).

Reflective questions

What does digital transformation mean to you?

What is the impact on higher education and its QA practices?

4.2 Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Define digital transformation, explore its significance in higher education institutions, and analyse key drivers and challenges.
- Develop strategic plans by setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals, conducting digital maturity assessments, and creating actionable roadmaps supported by effective leadership and governance.
- Apply innovative digital tools, secure infrastructure, and data-driven decision-making to improve institutional quality assurance, curriculum development, teaching, and assessment.
- Foster inclusive, accessible, and innovative learning environments by engaging diverse stakeholders and promoting professional development and digital skills training.
- Examine case studies to identify good practices, assess the impact of digital transformation initiatives, and adapt strategies to their institutional context.
- Evaluate the success of digital transformation efforts using KPIs and refine strategies based on feedback, challenges, and emerging trends.
- Design long-term sustainability plans to ensure continuous innovation and institutional growth.

4.3 Key concepts/Definitions

Digital transformation refers to the process of integrating digital technologies into all aspects of business operations to change how organizations operate and fundamentally deliver value to customers. Quality assurance testing plays a pivotal role in accelerating digital transformation initiatives by ensuring the reliability, performance, and security of digital solutions. QA in DT encompasses a range of activities aimed at identifying defects, validating functionality, and verifying compliance with business requirements.

Key concept	Definition/Principles
Digital transformation	DT involves integrating digital technology into all institutional areas, fundamentally changing operations, value delivery, and strategic goals. It allows institutions to adapt their infrastructure to embed the use of digital tools throughout all systems.
Key drivers	Evolving student expectations, technological advancements, institutional competitiveness, financial sustainability, and the need for stronger labour market connections.
Challenges	Resistance to change, budget constraints, privacy concerns, and the need for digital literacy.
Digitization	It primarily involves entering documents or data in digital format.
Digitalization	Adaptation of digitized documents or processes to the use of digital tools via computers and the internet.
Blended learning	A learner-centred approach that integrates complementary face-to-face (synchronous) and online learning (asynchronous) experiences in service of intended learning outcomes.
Online learning	Online learning is a mode where 100% of the learning materials and activities are conducted online, supporting both synchronous and asynchronous learning.
Digital badges	The Mozilla Foundation defines digital badges as a 'Digital credential that represents skills, interests, and achievements earned by an individual through specific projects, programmes, courses or other activities.' (Mozilla, 2013)
Micro-credentialing	A validated proof of a professional designation, certificate, or title earned.

Table 1: Key concepts and definitions in digital transformation

Types of digital transformation

Selecting the appropriate type of digital transformation is critical for leveraging technology to enhance institutional performance and efficiency. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach; institutions must align transformation types with their goals, challenges, and digital maturity levels (Westerman et al., 2014).

Name	Type
Process transformation	Entails reengineering workflows to enhance operations through technology. For example, automating administrative tasks like enrolment can improve efficiency and reduce errors (Berman, 2012).
Business model transformation	Focuses on redefining institutional strategies to capitalize on digital opportunities. For instance, shifting to subscription-based online education platforms expands reach and diversifies revenue streams (Vial, 2019).
Domain transformation	Leverages emerging technologies in specific operational areas. Implementing Artificial Intelligence (AI) for personalized learning pathways or blockchain for secure credentialing exemplifies this type of transformation (Henriette et al., 2015).
Cultural/Organizational transformation	Emphasizes fostering a digital-first mindset. Leadership must invest in digital skills training and champion innovation to overcome resistance and drive cultural change (Kane et al., 2015).
The maturity model	Evaluates an institution's readiness for transformation. Institutions with lower digital maturity might begin with process improvements, while more advanced institutions could explore AI-driven decision-making (Anderson, 2019). This ensures that transformation efforts are sustainable and impactful.

Table 2: Different types of digital transformation



By carefully selecting and aligning transformation types with institutional needs, organizations can strategically invest in technology to enhance efficiency and achieve long-term success (Westerman et al., 2014).

4.4 Digital transformation and quality assurance

Digital transformation (DT) is reshaping higher education institutions (HEIs) by integrating digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning, and administrative functions. Ensuring quality assurance in digital transformation is critical to maintaining credibility, improving student outcomes, and achieving institutional goals (Brown et al., 2021). Digital transformation in today's world is continuously advancing, and HEIs need to reexamine their infrastructure considering these advancements. As stated previously, DT must be embedded into all systems and processes within the institution's infrastructure. It is important to understand that DT is no longer a buzzword; instead, it involves redefining the organization's culture and operations to support and promote quality assurance for continuous improvement.

Furthermore, digital transformation is a cornerstone in advancing quality assurance within institutions, driving improvements across governance, operations, and educational delivery. Cultivating a digital culture and leadership is fundamental to this transformation, as fostering a digital mindset, encouraging innovation, and integrating digital practices into governance equips institutions to adapt to evolving challenges and opportunities (Kane et al., 2015). Equally important is infrastructure and security, where the establishment of scalable and secure digital systems ensures operational efficiency while safeguarding sensitive data, such as student records, against breaches (Berman, 2012). By focusing on curriculum and learning innovations, institutions can elevate education quality through the incorporation of digital tools in teaching, learning, and assessment processes, enabling more personalized and accessible educational experiences (Vial, 2019). Lastly, data-driven decision-making empowers institutions to leverage data management and business intelligence tools for enhanced planning and improved student outcomes, ensuring alignment with strategic goals and continuous improvement (Henriette et al., 2015). Together, these elements form the backbone of a digitally transformed, quality-focused institution, paving the way for sustainable growth and success in a competitive landscape.

To fully realize these benefits, institutions must establish clear policies that underpin and support digital transformation efforts. These policies should guide the implementation of secure and scalable infrastructure, regulate the use of data analytics tools, and ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards for data management and governance (Westerman et al., 2014). Policies promoting innovation and collaboration can foster institutional buy-in, while frameworks for digital leadership can provide accountability in driving change. By crafting comprehensive and adaptable policies, institutions can create an environment where digital transformation not only thrives but remains sustainable in the long term.

Digital culture and leadership

Institutions must foster a strong digital culture by encouraging innovation, enhancing leadership capabilities, and integrating digital practices into institutional governance. A digital mindset enables faculty, administrators, and students to adapt to technological advancements and leverage digital tools for learning and administration (Garrison, 2022). Leadership plays a pivotal role in driving DT by promoting collaboration, supporting faculty development, and ensuring that digital initiatives align with institutional goals (Brown et al., 2021). By integrating digital culture into governance, HEIs can enhance operational efficiency and maintain high educational standards (Smith, 2023).

Infrastructure and security

A secure, scalable, and robust digital infrastructure is crucial for ensuring operational efficiency and protecting sensitive student and institutional data. HEIs must invest in cloud-based learning management systems, cybersecurity frameworks, and scalable IT infrastructure to support digital learning (JISC, 2023). Cybersecurity measures such as encryption, access control, and regular security audits are essential to safeguarding student information and institutional data from cyber threats (Machado et al., 2024). A well-maintained digital infrastructure facilitates seamless communication, improves administrative functions, and enhances the overall learning experience, making institutions more resilient to technological disruptions (Reinitz, Martin and Xie, 2021; Abd-Rabo and Hashaikeh, 2021).

Curriculum and learning innovations

DT in higher education calls for reimagining teaching and learning methodologies to integrate technology in meaningful ways. Institutions could benefit from adopting blended and hybrid learning models, incorporating adaptive learning platforms, and utilizing AI-driven tools to personalize instruction and assessment (Laterza, Smith, and Johnson, 2023). These technologies enable a shift toward more flexible, student-centred learning experiences that respond to diverse needs and learning styles. To effectively implement these innovations, faculty must receive ongoing training in both digital tools and modern pedagogical strategies (Garrison, 2022). Emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and AI-powered tutoring systems can deepen student engagement and comprehension by providing immersive and interactive learning environments. By strategically aligning digital tools with curriculum design, HEIs can enhance educational quality, support diverse learners, and prepare students for a digitally driven world (Smith, 2023).

Data-driven decision-making

Institutions must leverage data management and business intelligence tools to enhance institutional planning and optimize student learning outcomes. Data analytics can provide insights into student performance, retention rates, and engagement levels, enabling institutions to make informed decisions regarding curriculum design and student support services (Machado et al., 2024). Predictive analytics, powered by AI, allows institutions to identify students at risk of dropping out and intervene proactively with personalized support (Brown, Reinitz and Wetzel, 2021). Implementing a data-driven culture ensures continuous quality improvement and helps institutions remain responsive to the evolving needs of students and stakeholders (JISC, 2023).

4.5 The role of leadership and governance in overseeing digital transformation initiatives.

From a teaching and learning perspective, DT in higher education requires significant institutional changes that integrate digital technologies across academic disciplines and administrative functions. A successful transition depends on the willingness of institutional members to adopt digital practices, making it necessary to establish a shared belief system that supports digital innovation (Niță and Guțu, 2023). Leadership within higher education, encompassing educators, mentors, and administrators, plays a crucial role in this transformation as institutional values continuously evolve to accommodate technological advancements (Garrison, 2022). Additionally, embedding DT within an institution requires aligning internal services with a well-defined digital culture, ensuring that digitalization enhances both administrative and academic processes (JISC, 2023). This transformation can only be effectively implemented when institutional leaders and stakeholders engage through interactive digital platforms, fostering agile institutions that prioritize digital content development, knowledge organization, and representation in education (Reinitz, Martin and Xie, 2021).

Leadership models that emerge during cultural shifts in organizations are extensively explored in literature, particularly in the context of DT. Institutions can achieve leadership success in the digital era by embracing transformational and transactional leadership styles. Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and intellectually engaging followers, whereas transactional leadership applies contingent rewards and reinforcement mechanisms to drive performance (Niță and Guțu, 2023). Research suggests that leaders who actively monitor technological trends, adapt investment strategies accordingly, and efficiently lead institutional change create an environment conducive to digital literacy and transformation (Machado et al., 2024). This approach fosters institutional networks where educators act as leaders and students as digitally competent followers, reinforcing collaborative learning structures (Smith, 2023).

Within DT research, transformational leadership is particularly valued for its role in fostering trust, ethical decision-making, and collective responsibility among institutional members. By prioritizing digital readiness and fostering a culture of continuous innovation, transformational leaders ensure that institutions adapt to changing educational landscapes effectively (Brown, Reinitz and Wetzel, 2021). Consequently, transformational leadership within DT contexts evolves into digital leadership, integrating technological advancements with leadership competencies to enhance institutional effectiveness and sustainability (Laterza, Smith and Johnson, 2023).

4.6 Tips on Implementation Strategies

DT is about educating faculty members, administrative staff, and students about the benefits of a new way of achieving their tasks and supporting them to accept new technologies rather than be apprehensive about them. The first step should be to set goals, as this will provide everyone involved in the project with a clear understanding of what they are working towards and where their focus should lie, motivating them to bring about change. Furthermore, it will allow you to evaluate, track, and measure the performance of the project, keeping everything and everyone on course for success.

Below you will find a list of recommended tips that will enable your institution to successfully implement digital transformation:

- **Establish a clear vision and goals:** Align digital initiatives with institutional missions and define SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals.
- **Secure leadership and governance:** Ensure senior leadership commitment and establish governance structures like steering committees.
- **Conduct comprehensive assessments:** Evaluate current digital capabilities and benchmark against peer institutions.
- **Develop a strategic roadmap:** Implement a phased transformation approach, allocate necessary resources, and manage risks effectively.
- **Engage stakeholders:** Involve faculty, staff, students, and external partners through communication and participation.
- **Invest in technology and infrastructure:** Upgrade digital tools and infrastructure to support education and administration.
- **Foster a culture of innovation:** Provide training for faculty and students while encouraging experimentation.
- **Implement and monitor progress:** Set performance indicators, track progress, and adjust strategies as needed.
- **Celebrate successes and learn from challenges:** Recognize achievements and iterate based on lessons learned.

4.7 Quality assurance considerations for online learning platforms, digital resources, and educational technology tools

The landscape of HE is changing, where it plays a significant role in society, and the concept of achieving the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for the job market is changing.

Think about this for a moment and ask yourself

Where is your institution in this? What about you?

What is your role?

Online learning platforms are changing the way education is perceived, especially as far as reskilling or upskilling is concerned. Digital resources in HEIs involve utilizing technologies such as cloud computing, data analytics, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things (IoT) to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, and create new opportunities.

The use of Educational Technology (Edtech) tools has changed the concept of teaching and learning, and the quality of pedagogical practices, learning processes, and assessment practices.

The digital transformations in HEIs must take the following points into consideration:

- In the 21st century, the pace of edtech advancements is fast;
- Changes that have occurred over the last two decades include, for example, gamification, learning analytics, flipped classrooms, cloud computing, and virtual and augmented realities.
- Edtech or Educational Technology is digital technology that is designed to enhance or aid teaching and learning, utilizing computer hardware, software, and educational theory to enrich learning experiences. It gives learners the chance to acquire knowledge faster, easier, and cheaper than ever before. At the same time, educators have the chance to create, deliver, and refine content wherever they are at a fraction of the cost and time of in-person, on-site lessons. The term covers all aspects of computer-aided education, including virtual lessons, microlearning programmes, community-led social learning platforms, and more.

Reflection questions

How have you incorporated these tools into your quality practices?

What tools do you use, and how do they support the quality infrastructure within your teaching and learning practices?

Let's take AI and dig a little deeper into how it can help with the DT that is occurring in HEIs. The integration of AI and education will open new opportunities to vastly improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers can benefit from intelligent systems that aid in assessments, data collection, enhancing learning progress, and developing new strategies. Students can benefit from smart tutors and asynchronous learning in advancing learning outcomes.

4.8 The Crossroads of QA and Digital Transformation

In higher education, DT has become more prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing the infrastructure and QA measures is important in this transformation. Elements of quality transformation are automated processes, optimized operating models, faster delivery, self-diagnostic and self-healing systems, and in-process quality enablement.

QA plays an integral role in digital transformation, though institutions often tend to undervalue its importance. QA in digital transformation helps organizations mitigate risks, optimize processes, and deliver high-quality software products and services that meet the expectations of users and stakeholders.

Discussion questions:

What is the role of QA in digital transformation in higher education?

What is happening at your institution?

4.9 Case studies in quality assurance

Case study from Africa

The article *Digital Transformation of Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Opportunities in Advanced Digital Skills* explores the complex landscape of digital transformation across HEIs in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). It highlights both systemic barriers and emerging opportunities related to the integration of advanced digital skills. Key points include:

Infrastructure deficiencies: Many SSA HEIs struggle with inadequate infrastructure, including unreliable power supply and limited internet connectivity, which undermines digital learning implementation.

Digital literacy gaps: A widespread lack of digital literacy among both educators and learners limits the adoption and effectiveness of digital tools.

Financial constraints: Limited financial resources prevent investments in infrastructure, training, and digital content development.

Policy and governance issues: Outdated or absent institutional ICT policies impede the systemic adoption of digital education practices.

Opportunities for growth: Despite challenges, opportunities exist in leveraging public-private partnerships, regional collaborations, and targeted skill development to advance digital transformation.

Source: Agba et al., 2024

Case study activity: strategic planning for digital transformation in SSA HEIs

The objective is to engage participants in applying strategic planning principles to address digital transformation challenges in Sub-Saharan African HEIs.

Group work

Each group acts as a digital transformation task force at its own university.

Scenario assessment

Groups assess key factors: current infrastructure, digital literacy among staff/students, financial capacity, institutional ICT policy status.

Challenge and opportunity mapping

Identify 3–5 core barriers and potential opportunities for transformation.

Strategic plan development

Create a phased plan covering: Infrastructure upgrades (e.g., cost-effective, scalable options); Capacity-building (e.g., digital literacy workshops); Financial strategies (e.g., partnerships, grants); Policy development (e.g., ICT integration roadmap).

Presentations and peer feedback

Groups present their plans for open discussion and peer critique.

Expected outcome

Participants will understand how to develop adaptive, resource-conscious digital strategies tailored to SSA's higher education context, fostering innovation and inclusivity.

Note: for more case studies, see Annex 2.

4.10 Striking a balance: navigating the opportunities and risks of AI and DT in higher education

As Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) and DT continue to reshape higher education, it is critical to strike a balance between embracing technological advancements and mitigating associated risks. Both AI and broader digital tools offer transformative potential for teaching, learning, and institutional operations, but their adoption must be carefully managed to preserve educational integrity, human interaction, and ethical values. This section outlines key risks and corresponding strategies to ensure that the use of AI and DT supports quality education and ethical integrity.

Key considerations

Harness and protect

Leverage digital and AI capabilities for content creation, administrative efficiency, and personalized learning while preserving human intuition and decision-making. Faculty should guide the thoughtful integration of these technologies to ensure they enhance, rather than replace, core educational values (Karolinska Institute, 2024).

AI offers scalable solutions for content generation, personalized learning, and administrative efficiency. However, its deployment must be guided by human intuition and oversight. Institutions must ensure that AI tools serve pedagogical purposes and reinforce, rather than replace, human judgment. Faculty should be empowered to integrate AI thoughtfully, applying it where it enhances cognitive engagement and reduces administrative burden without compromising academic integrity (Smith, 2023).

Classroom enhancement

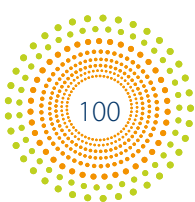
Use digital tools and AI to supplement, not substitute, pedagogical strategies. Tools like intelligent tutoring systems and adaptive platforms must support inclusive, engaging, and accessible education, with educators at the centre of instructional design (Garrison, 2022).

While AI can enrich lessons through interactive tools and adaptive content, there is a risk of diminishing the role of the educator. Effective implementation ensures that AI augments the learning experience rather than displacing traditional methods. Educators should maintain control over lesson design while using AI to offer personalized feedback, real-time analytics, and inclusive learning experiences (Garrison, 2022).

Active learning with AI

Promote inquiry-based learning with simulations, real-time feedback, and data-driven interventions while preserving critical thinking, creativity, and peer collaboration. A hybrid approach ensures that students use AI as a learning tool rather than a crutch (Machado et al., 2024).

Generative AI can encourage active learning by enabling students to explore complex problems, simulate real-world scenarios, and receive immediate feedback. However, over-reliance on AI tools may dampen students' critical thinking and creativity. Therefore, educators should design activities where AI stimulates inquiry while maintaining space for reflection, peer collaboration, and human interaction (Brown, Reinitz and Wetzel, 2021).



Key considerations	
Educator's role	<p>Faculty development is essential to ensure educators remain the ethical and pedagogical leaders of the digital age. Training must address data ethics, technological fluency, and digital pedagogy (Smith, 2023).</p> <p>Educators are central to overseeing ethical AI use in the classroom. Continuous professional development is necessary to equip faculty with the digital literacy and ethical awareness required to guide students effectively. Institutions must invest in training programmes that focus on digital pedagogy, ethical use of AI tools, and strategies for curriculum integration (Laterza, Smith and Johnson, 2023).</p>
Safety and governance	<p>As institutions become more digitally dependent, cybersecurity and ethical oversight are crucial. HEIs must adopt institutional governance frameworks that include risk assessments, data protection protocols, and interdisciplinary oversight committees (Díaz-García et al., 2023).</p> <p>AI systems collect vast amounts of student data, raising concerns about privacy and data protection. To mitigate these risks, institutions must implement strong cybersecurity measures, transparent data governance policies, and ethical guidelines for adoption of AI. Establishing multidisciplinary AI governance committees can help align technology use with institutional values and legal obligations (Machado et al., 2024).</p>
Ethical usage	<p>Promote responsible digital and AI use among students through integrity policies, awareness campaigns, and curricular integration of digital ethics. Mitigating plagiarism, bias, and misinformation requires a proactive and transparent approach (Karolinska Institute, 2024).</p> <p>Ensuring ethical student engagement with AI requires a proactive and strategic approach. This includes developing policies that address plagiarism, misinformation, and algorithmic bias. Academic integrity guidelines should be revised to reflect AI capabilities, and students must be taught to use AI responsibly, with a strong emphasis on transparency and accountability in their work (Garrison, 2022).</p>
Challenges and risks	<p>Insufficient digital literacy among educators and students; Overreliance on automation reduces critical thinking; Privacy vulnerabilities in data management systems; Algorithmic bias impacts assessment fairness.</p>
Solutions	<p>Establish robust digital competency and ethics training programmes; Maintain hybrid models that emphasize human oversight; Conduct routine audits of digital platforms and AI tools; Foster interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure balanced technology use.</p>

Table 3: Key considerations

Challenges and opportunities in African HEIs (Babalola and Genga, 2024)

- **Digital infrastructure:** African HEIs often grapple with inadequate digital infrastructure, hindering the effective implementation of digital transformation initiatives.
- **Leadership commitment:** Strong leadership is crucial for driving digital transformation. Effective leaders can navigate challenges related to policy formulation and resource allocation.
- **Financial constraints:** Limited financial resources pose significant barriers to investing in necessary technologies and training programmes essential for digital advancement.
- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI):** Ensuring that digital transformation strategies are inclusive and equitable remains a challenge, necessitating deliberate efforts to incorporate DEI principles.
- **Policy and framework development:** The absence of comprehensive policies and frameworks can impede the seamless integration of digital technologies within institutional operations.
- **External factors:** Socio-economic and political factors, including regulatory environments and market dynamics, significantly influence the pace and success of digital transformation in African HEIs.

By integrating digital transformation and AI within a thoughtful, human-centred framework, HEIs can ensure these technologies serve as tools to enhance quality, equity, and innovation in higher education.

Algorithmic bias refers to systematic and repeatable errors in computer systems that result in unfair outcomes, such as privileging one group over another in unintended ways. This bias can arise from various factors, including skewed or limited training data, subjective programming decisions, or the unintended use of algorithms in contexts for which they were not designed (IBM, 2024).

4.11 Conclusions

HEIs need to take action by leveraging digital transformation to enhance teaching, learning, and institutional operations. Success requires strong leadership, strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation. Institutions that embrace digital transformation effectively will remain competitive, enhance student learning experiences, and improve overall institutional effectiveness (Garrison, 2022). Moreover, the adoption of emerging technologies and data-driven decision-making will play a crucial role in ensuring sustainable development in higher education (Smith, 2023). Continuous assessment of digital initiatives and collaboration among educators, administrators, and policymakers will be essential in creating a more agile, inclusive, and innovative academic environment (JISC, 2023).

Digital transformation in HEIs is essential for maintaining competitiveness, improving student experiences, and ensuring operational efficiency. Institutions are expected to take action by leveraging digital tools to enhance teaching, learning, and institutional operations. Achieving this vision requires strong leadership, strategic planning, and a shared digital culture. Equally important are stakeholder engagement and continuous evaluation to ensure adaptability and long-term success. As noted by Díaz-García et al. (2023), strategic alignment and inclusive governance structures are critical in overcoming digital resistance. Moreover, fostering an innovation-driven and inclusive culture can increase institutional excellence and stakeholder trust (Cavallone et al., 2020). Ultimately, digital transformation in higher education is not just a technological upgrade but a comprehensive reimagining of how institutions deliver value to learners, educators, and society at large.



In conclusion, digital transformation in HEIs is essential for maintaining competitiveness, improving student experiences, and ensuring operational efficiency. Institutions can successfully navigate the digital landscape and enhance their educational offerings by implementing strategic planning, fostering innovation, and integrating quality assurance practices. Success requires leadership, strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation (Smith, 2023; Brown et al., 2021; Díaz-Garcia et al., 2023).

Key takeaways

- Technology has become an integral part of education.
- Digital transformation has become a strategic imperative.
- How we use it depends on our context and educational needs.

Annex 1: Module Assignments

This Annex is designed to help participants engage with key concepts in digital transformation for higher education institutions (HEIs). It includes self-assessments, strategic planning exercises, case study analysis, and a final quiz to reinforce learning outcomes.

Assignment 1: Digital maturity self-assessment (individual)

Participants will evaluate their institution's current level of digital transformation readiness using a structured self-assessment framework.

Instructions

- Complete the Digital Maturity Assessment Checklist (provided below).
- Use a rating scale (1-5) to evaluate each area.
- Reflect on areas needing improvement and provide 2-3 recommendations.

Submission

- Participants submit a **2-page reflection report** summarizing their self-assessment and action plan.

Category	Indicators	Rating (1-5)
Leadership and vision	The institution has a clear digital transformation strategy.	
	Senior leadership supports and drives digital innovation.	
Technology infrastructure	Reliable digital tools and systems are in place.	
	Cybersecurity measures and data protection are well-established.	
Teaching and learning	Digital tools enhance curriculum delivery.	
	Faculty receive ongoing training on digital pedagogy.	
Stakeholder engagement	Faculty, staff, and students are involved in digital transformation planning.	
	External partnerships support innovation.	
Data and quality Assurance	The institution uses data analytics for decision-making.	
	Student performance tracking and feedback systems are digitized.	

Table 4: Assessment Checklist

Reflection Questions

- What are your institution's strengths in digital transformation?
- What are the key challenges?
- What actions would you recommend to enhance digital transformation?

Assignment 2: Strategic action plan for DT (group project)

Participants will collaborate in teams to develop a Strategic Digital Transformation Action Plan for their institution.

Instructions

- Work in groups of 3-5 to analyse your institution's digital transformation needs.
- Develop an action plan using the provided template.
- Present the plan (Evaluating and Sustaining Digital Transformation).

Submission

- Groups submit a 2–3-page action plan and deliver a 5-minute presentation.

Section	Description
Vision statement	Define the institution's digital transformation vision.
Goals	Identify 3-5 SMART goals (e.g., improve online learning, enhance digital literacy).
Key initiatives	Outline specific projects (e.g., LMS upgrade, faculty training).
Stakeholder engagement	Describe how faculty, students, and staff will be involved.
Technology and infrastructure	List the necessary tools, platforms, and infrastructure.
Implementation timeline	Develop a 6-month to 3-year phased approach.
Evaluation and success metrics	Define KPIs to measure progress.

Table 5: Action Plan Template

Assignment 3: Case study presentation – lessons from digital transformation (group project)

Participants will analyse and present key takeaways from real-world digital transformation case studies.

Instructions:

- Each group will select and analyse a case study (e.g., Maldives National University).
- Identify challenges, strategies, and outcomes from the case.
- Compare the case study's approach to their own institution's needs.
- Deliver a 10-minute presentation including: case study overview, key takeaways, lessons applicable to their institution

Submission:

- Each group submits a 3-slide PowerPoint deck summarizing their analysis.

Annex 2: Relevant resources

Alenezi, M. 2021. Deep dive into digital transformation in higher education institutions. *Education Sciences*, Vol. 11, No. 12, pp. 770. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120770>

OECD. 2023. Shaping Digital Education Enabling Factors For Quality, Equity And Efficiency https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/07/shaping-digital-education_08b85d69/bac4dc9f-en.pdf

TEDx Talks. 2022. Digital Transformation in Education, why does it take so long? | Jeroen Krouwels | TEDxDenHelder. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To3_vZcVD0o

UNESCO. 2020. The Digital Transformation of Education. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVCCX_Z7dPk

Case studies referred to in Section 4.9

Georgia State University

- Implemented AI-driven analytics to track student engagement.
- Resulted in a 21.4% reduction in student dropout rates (Machado et al., 2024).

Karolinska Institute

- Developed comprehensive guidance on integrating generative AI into teaching and assessment practices.
- Encourages educators to enhance learning outcomes by using AI for content creation, peer review, and formative feedback.
- Emphasizes the importance of balancing AI use with ethical considerations, including data privacy and academic integrity.
- Offers professional development resources to help faculty align AI usage with pedagogical goals (Karolinska Institute, 2024).

Maldives National University

- Transitioned to a blended learning model with faculty upskilling.
- Achieved a sustainable digital transformation framework (Maina et al., 2021).

Norwegian Multi-Campus University

- Provided digital training for faculty, increasing online learning participation by 25% (Laterza et al., 2023).
- Improved student success rates through blended learning models.

Prince Sultan University

- Implemented a digital transformation initiative that enhanced e-learning platforms and student engagement.

Examples of EdTech software and tool

- Kahoot, Quizlet, Duolingo,
- LMS: such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Gen AI,
- Automated Assessment Tools such as Coursera, EdX, Udemy, Canva.

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Module 5

National, Regional and
Continental Quality
Assurance Frameworks and
Recognition of Qualifications

Miriam Chiyaba

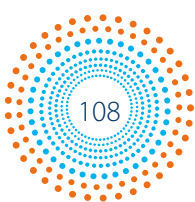
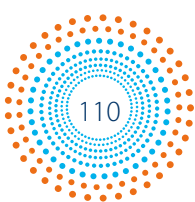


Table of Contents

Acronyms	110
5.1 Introduction	111
5.2 Learning outcomes	111
5.3 Key concepts in quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications	111
5.4 Quality assurance in the context of the National Qualifications Framework / National Qualifications System	113
5.4.1 Key aspects of how QA operates within NQF / NQS	113
5.4.2 How QA functions within NQFs.....	113
5.4.3 NQF and QA linkages within a qualifications system.....	114
5.4.4 Benefits of QA within NQFs.....	114
5.4.5 Challenges of linking QA to QFs.....	115
5.5 Regional quality assurance frameworks and recognition of qualifications.....	115
5.5.1 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Quality Assurance Framework	115
5.5.2 Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN)	116
5.5.3 East African Qualifications Framework	117
5.5.4 East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN)	117
5.5.5 West African Anglophone Quality Assurance Network (WAAQAN).....	117
5.5.6 The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES)	118
5.5.7 African Francophone Network of National Quality Assurance Agencies (RAFANAQ)	118
5.5.8 Benefits of regional Quality Assurance Initiatives.....	118
5.5.9 Challenges faced in regional quality assurance.....	118
5.6 Intercontinental quality assurance and recognition of qualifications.....	119
5.6.1 Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework.....	119
5.6.2 African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA).....	120
5.6.3 The Bologna Process.....	120
5.6.4 The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).....	120
5.6.5 African Continental Qualifications Framework- ACQF	120
5.6.6 African Union Continental Education Strategy 2026 - 2035 (CESA 26-35).....	120
5.7 Conventions supporting quality assurance and recognition of qualifications	120

Acronyms

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AQRM	African Quality Rating Mechanism
ASG – QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
CAMES	The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
EAQAN	East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network
EAQFHE	East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education
HAQAA	Harmonization of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation
IUCEA	Inter-University Council for East Africa
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
PAQAF	Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework
QA	Quality Assurance
QAF	Quality Assurance Frameworks
RAFANAQ	African Francophone Network of National Quality Assurance Agencies
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
SAQAN	Southern African Quality Assurance Network
SARUA	Southern African Universities Association
WAAQAN	West African Anglophone Quality Assurance Network



5.1 Introduction

In an increasingly globalised educational landscape, the significance of quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE) has never been more pronounced. As students, lecturers and professionals alike cross borders to pursue varying opportunities, the recognition of qualifications becomes a gateway to the actualisation of professional advancement, further study and many other opportunities. This module delves into the intricate relationship between national, regional, and continental Quality Assurance Frameworks (QAF) and the recognition of qualifications, exploring how robust QAFs can enhance trust, credibility, and transparency in higher education. By understanding the various quality assurance frameworks and their impact on qualification recognition, ranging from accreditation processes to compliance with international standards, the module aims to highlight how these elements are essential for fostering not only student mobility but also a sustainable framework for academic excellence. Through this exploration, the module will underscore the importance of aligning institutional practices with national, regional and continental benchmarks to ensure that all students receive equitable opportunities in their educational journeys.

5.2 Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Understand key concepts related to the recognition of qualifications, including accreditation, benchmarking, and credential evaluation.
- Understand quality assurance frameworks at national, regional and continental levels.
- Explain how national, regional and continental quality assurance frameworks are connected and influence qualification recognition.
- Identify common challenges faced by institutions in implementing quality assurance measures that support the recognition of qualifications.
- Recognize the importance of collaboration among government agencies, accrediting bodies, educational institutions, and other stakeholders in promoting effective quality assurance frameworks and the recognition of qualifications.

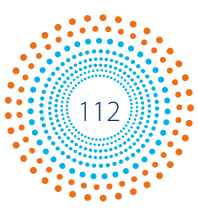
5.3 Key concepts in quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications

Key concepts in quality assurance that are fundamental to understanding how quality assurance functions within higher education systems and how it enables the effective recognition of qualifications across different contexts are discussed below:

Key concept	Definition
Quality assurance	A systematic process designed to determine whether educational institutions and programmes meet established standards of quality. QA ensures accountability, enhances institutional effectiveness, and fosters continuous improvement.
Accreditation	A formal recognition by an external body that an institution or programme meets specific quality standards. Accreditation can be institutional (for the entire institution) or programmatic (specific to a particular programme).

Key concept	Definition
Verification of qualifications	A process used to confirm that an individual holds the qualifications they claim to have. It focuses on validating that the documents provided (degrees or certificates) are authentic and issued by legitimate institutions, duly registered and accredited by a Competent Authority. This may involve contacting the issuing institution directly to affirm that they issued the documents in question or using databases maintained by Qualification Authorities or verification bodies. Verification ensures that there are no fraudulent claims regarding education.
Learning outcomes	Statements that specify what learners should know, understand, or be able to do upon completion of a course or programme. Learning outcomes are crucial for assessing the effectiveness of educational programmes.
Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)	Mechanisms within an institution aimed at ensuring that its academic offerings consistently meet set standards and that there is a culture of continuous improvement.
External Quality Assurance (EQA)	Review processes conducted by external agencies, such as accreditation bodies that evaluate the quality of education provided by an institution against established benchmarks.
Recognition agreements/ Conventions	Legal frameworks and mutual agreements between countries or institutions aimed at simplifying the process for recognizing foreign qualifications through built-in protocols.
Recognition of qualifications	Recognition of qualifications refers to the process of evaluating and validating educational credentials, often across borders, so that they are accepted for professional, academic, employment or immigration purposes. This process is crucial for ensuring that qualifications obtained in one country or system are understood and valued in another.
National Qualifications Framework / System	A structured system that organises and categorises qualifications based on specific levels, criteria, or descriptors of learning outcomes. NQFs aim to make qualifications more transparent, comparable, and accessible, helping to align education and training with the needs of learners, employers, and the wider society. NQFs typically define the knowledge, skills, and competencies a person must demonstrate to achieve a qualification at each level of the framework. A National Qualifications System (NQS) typically refers to a national structure that does not have a formal NQF but exists to ensure that qualifications are recognized and meet certain quality standards.
Quality Assurance and Qualification Networks	QA and qualification networks are collaborative frameworks that bring together experts in QA and / or qualifications management with a common purpose to enhance the quality of education and ensure that qualifications are recognized across different countries. Networks establish standards and share good practices aimed at improving education systems, fostering regional and international mobility.

Table 1: Key concepts in quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications



5.4 Quality assurance in the context of the National Qualifications Framework / National Qualifications System

Quality assurance in the context of the NQF or NQS is crucial to ensuring that qualifications are consistent, credible, and of a high standard at the national level. The NQF / NQS supports the alignment of educational qualifications with labour market needs, while ensuring the quality and credibility of the outcomes from the higher education sector of the country. Many NQFs also aim to describe general descriptors that would relate to societal and civic knowledge and how a degree at a certain NQF level would expect civic engagement from the graduate or degree holder. The NQFs further describe general competencies related to sustainability that can be applied in the workforce and beyond.

5.4.1 Key aspects of how QA operates within NQF / NQS

Clear qualification levels: NQFs provide clear definitions of what constitutes a qualification at each level. QA systems ensure that qualifications meet these criteria, which are based on transparent and rigorous standards that often focus on the learning outcomes expected at each level, ensuring that qualifications are reliable and comparable.

Consistency and comparability: QA systems help ensure that qualifications at the same level are consistent across different institutions, sectors, or regions. They also ensure that qualifications are comparable with continental and international standards, which facilitates global recognition and mobility.

Transparency: By linking qualifications to specific levels and providing clear descriptions of what learners are expected to achieve, QA within an NQF ensures that both learners and employers can easily understand the value of qualifications.

5.4.2 How QA functions within NQFs

Within the framework of an NQF, quality assurance ensures that the qualifications awarded by institutions adhere to a set of established standards and are aligned with the framework's intended outcomes. Several mechanisms of QA are used in this context:

Accreditation of providers and programmes: QA processes often involve the accreditation of educational institutions and specific academic or vocational programmes. Accreditation ensures that providers meet the criteria for offering qualifications within the NQF and that their programmes adhere to standards of content, pedagogy, and assessment.

Regular monitoring and evaluation: QA systems within NQFs involve continuous monitoring and periodic evaluation of the qualifications, programmes, and institutions that are part of the framework. This ensures that they remain up to date with evolving industry demands and educational good practices.

External evaluation and peer review: In many cases, external agencies or peer reviewers assess institutions or programmes to verify that they meet the quality standards set by the NQF. This helps to maintain impartiality and objectivity in the evaluation process.

Assessing learning outcomes: A central aspect of quality assurance in NQFs is the emphasis on learning outcomes, the knowledge, skills, and competencies learners are expected to acquire. QA processes assess whether the learning outcomes of a qualification are clearly defined, achievable, and aligned with national, regional or international needs.

Curriculum development and alignment: QA ensures that curricula linked to an NQF are developed in a way that reflects current educational and professional needs. Institutions must align their curriculum with the levels of the NQF to ensure that students are learning appropriate skills and knowledge.

Validation or verification of qualifications: QA systems often involve the validation of qualifications within the NQF by external bodies, ensuring that each qualification is credible, valuable, and recognized both within the country and internationally, including at regional and continental levels.

To ensure the integrity and credibility of qualifications within an NQF, QA is supported by governance and regulatory bodies that define and enforce standards. These bodies are typically responsible for ensuring that institutions comply with the qualifications framework requirements and for overseeing accreditation and assessment processes. Further, quality assurance processes often involve consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, including employers, industry representatives, students, and education providers to ensure that qualifications are relevant and meet the needs of the economy and labour market.

5.4.3 NQF and QA linkages within a qualifications system

The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) illustrates NQF and QA linkages within a qualifications system highlighting that:

Quality assurance of qualifications is concerned with four dimensions:

- Quality qualifications: concepts and characteristics, quality cycle.
- Minimum criteria for the quality of qualifications.
- Quality assurance elements from a qualification system perspective: qualification standards, assessment and certification; and
- Qualifications quality chain: from standards to awards.

Quality assurance for quality qualifications consists of two broad processes ensuring that:

- Qualifications are relevant and have value; and
- People who are certificated meet the conditions of the qualification.

5.4.4 Benefits of QA within NQFs

Enhanced credibility and recognition: QA ensures that qualifications meet established standards and are recognized both domestically and internationally. This enhances the value and credibility of the qualifications within the NQF.

Improved education quality: QA processes linked to NQF processes lead to continuous improvement in teaching and learning, ensuring that institutions provide quality education and training.

Increased transparency: NQFs with strong QA mechanisms provide greater transparency regarding the quality and value of qualifications. Students, employers, and other stakeholders can easily understand the learning outcomes and level of qualifications.

Labour market relevance: By aligning qualifications with industry standards and labour market needs, QA ensures that students are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary for successful careers.

Facilitation of mobility: QA ensures that qualifications within an NQF are comparable and transferable, promoting greater mobility of students, workers, and professionals both within the country and internationally.



5.4.5 Challenges of linking QA to QFs

Lack of resources: Many countries face challenges in funding and staffing their QA agencies, which can limit their effectiveness in overseeing NQFs.

Inconsistencies between institutions: Despite the NQF framework, there may still be variations in the implementation of quality standards across different institutions.

Resistance to change: Institutions and stakeholders may resist the standardisation of qualifications, particularly if it challenges entrenched practices or requires significant reform.

Group reflections

- Discuss how your national quality assurance system is structured, identifying the key elements that are working well to promote the recognition of qualifications from the HE sectors and those that need improvement.
- Propose measures that can be put in place to improve the QA system in your country with a clear action plan for possible implementation in the next 5 years.

5.5 Regional quality assurance frameworks and recognition of qualifications

Regional quality assurance initiatives in Africa are collaborative efforts that aim to enhance the quality, credibility, and recognition of higher education qualifications across the continent. These initiatives focus on improving the standards of education and fostering mutual recognition of qualifications to support student mobility, regional integration, and the development of human capital in Africa. The regional quality assurance initiatives are coordinated in line with common regional interest as can be seen by initiatives supported by regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC). Some regional quality assurance initiatives worth noting are described in the sections below.

5.5.1 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Quality Assurance Framework

The SADC region has developed a framework for harmonizing quality assurance in higher education institutions across its member states, which include Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The SADC Quality Assurance Framework²⁰ aims to improve the recognition of qualifications and facilitate the mobility of students and academic staff within the region. The SADC Quality Assurance is one of the implementation areas of the SADC Qualifications Framework (SADCQF). The SADCQF is a regional mechanism for comparability and recognition of full qualifications, credit transfer, creation of regional standards and facilitation of quality assurance.

²⁰ See Figure 1 showing Infographic of the SADCQF Quality Assurance guidelines.



Figure 1. SADCQF Quality Assurance guidelines (Source: South African Qualifications Authority, 2023)

5.5.2 Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN)

SAQAN was established to support the SADC QA initiatives by promoting and strengthening quality assurance in higher education institutions within the Southern African region. The main aims of SAQAN are to promote quality in higher education, foster harmonization of quality assurance systems in the region and beyond; and facilitate international recognition of higher education qualifications from Southern Africa to enhance the mobility of staff and students.

In line with this, SAQAN promotes the creation of effective and efficient quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms in higher education within Southern Africa; supports the development of quality assurance through capacity building initiatives; disseminates information; participates and collaborates in continental and international training and research programmes within Southern Africa; mobilises resources to sustain the Network's projects and programmes; and maintains a database of quality assurance bodies and experts.

In 2018, SAQAN signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Southern African Universities Association (SARUA), a membership-based association of public and private higher education institutions in SADC aimed at fostering quality assurance in higher education. In terms of this MoU, the two organizations will collaborate in areas of mutual interest, develop and manage joint projects, and engage together in advocacy to policymakers and regulatory bodies on Quality Management matters:

- SARUA should have the primary responsibility for IQA capacity development and SAQAN shall be responsible for EQA capacity development.
- SARUA will maintain a strong focus on internal quality management systems (including supporting technology) while participating as a key partner in strengthening external QA capacity development.



5.5.3 East African Qualifications Framework

The East African Community (EAC) is a regional intergovernmental organization of eight (8) Partner States, comprising the Republic of Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Kenya, Republic of Rwanda, Federal Republic of Somalia, Republic of South Sudan, Republic of Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. The EAC through the [Inter-University Council for East Africa](#) (IUCEA) as its institution responsible for coordinating the development of higher education and research in the Community developed the [East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education](#) (EAQFHE).

The EAQFHE provides the set of policies, objectives and information central to the organization, management, implementation and monitoring arrangements for the qualifications framework. The EAQFHE has eight guiding and operational objectives, which provide a standard and flexible framework to enable the Partner States to develop and implement NQFs that address current and future education and comparability challenges. Among the key objectives of EAQFHE is one that aims to strengthen national regulatory and quality assurance arrangements for education and training. The roles of the Partner States include:

- Promoting and applying the principles of quality assurance in education, when relating higher education and vocational education qualifications to the EAQFHE.
- Designating national higher education regulatory agencies linked to the structures and requirements of the Partner States, to support and, in conjunction with other relevant national authorities, guide the relationship between national qualifications systems and the EAQFHE with a view to promoting the quality and transparency of that relationship.

The IUCEA is a pivotal body that brings together representatives from national authorities and other stakeholders to constitute the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education Committee and provides oversight of the EAQFHE implementation.

5.5.4 East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN)

The EAQAN is a network of quality assurance practitioners in the EAC. It was established with the aim of strengthening the quality of higher education and ensuring that qualifications are recognized across the Member States. The key features of EAQAN include:

- Harmonization of quality assurance standards in order to align the quality assurance processes and accreditation standards across member countries. This ensures that institutions in the region follow similar procedures for evaluating the quality of education, leading to consistency and mutual recognition of qualifications.
- Enhancing regional cooperation and collaboration between national quality assurance bodies, institutions, and stakeholders in the region. This cooperation strengthens the capacity of national agencies and helps improve education quality.
- Providing a platform for the exchange of good practices and experiences related to quality assurance. It helps share insights on developing effective quality assurance mechanisms, including self-assessments, external evaluations, and accreditation processes.
- Facilitating capacity-building and training of quality assurance professionals within East Africa and supporting institutional accreditation.

5.5.5 West African Anglophone Quality Assurance Network (WAAQAN)

[WAAQAN](#) is a regional body established to improve the quality of higher education across West Africa. It works to harmonize quality assurance practices, facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications, and promote good practices in education across the West African region. WAAQAN aims to enhance the credibility of higher education institutions

and ensure that they meet both regional, continental, and international standards. Like similar regional bodies, WAAQAN's focus is on the harmonization of quality assurance systems, improvement of educational standards, mutual recognition of qualifications and capacity-building. WAAQAN member states include Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Liberia, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Guinea.

5.5.6 The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES)

CAMES is a body, established in 1968, to coordinate higher education issues in French-speaking countries in Africa. CAMES is an intergovernmental institution for integrating higher education systems. It is made up of 19 countries as of July 2025 (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Congo, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal and Togo) in addition to a dozen inter-state higher education and research institutions. CAMES works closely with national and regional governments to ensure the quality of higher education in the region.

5.5.7 African Francophone Network of National Quality Assurance Agencies (RAFANAQ)

The [African Francophone Network of National Quality Assurance Agencies](#) (RAFANAQ) is a non-profit organization. The Network is committed to ensuring and improving the quality of higher education and research in French-speaking Africa by strengthening the work of national quality assurance agencies and other organizations with similar objectives. The network has 11 member countries (Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, Togo and Tunisia) and several partners as well as observer members.

5.5.8 Benefits of regional Quality Assurance Initiatives

Improved standards: These initiatives help raise the quality of education in African countries by implementing common standards and practices.

Increased student mobility: With mutual recognition of qualifications, students can more easily move across borders for further education or employment.

Regional integration: By aligning higher education systems, the initiatives support regional economic and political integration in Africa.

Better international recognition: A standardised system increases the global credibility of African qualifications and institutions.

5.5.9 Challenges faced in regional quality assurance

- Inconsistent implementation as some countries may face difficulties in fully implementing QAFs due to limited resources or political will.
- Funding constraints lead to some regional QA initiatives being underfunded, limiting their scope and effectiveness.
- Ensuring that QAAs are adequately trained and equipped to carry out their roles can be challenging in some regions.
- Overlapping regional initiatives and mandates of different networks, associations, as well as regional economic bodies.
- Language disparities within a region may lead to coordination challenges, such as in the SADC region, and in West Africa.

Discussion points

Reflect on the regional initiatives that exist in your region. Are you adequately informed and updated on the developments in the region?

- Have you practically experienced the benefits arising from these initiatives? If so, share examples.
- What role has your country played in informing and shaping the future of QA and the recognition of qualifications in the region?
- Are there any areas that should be a priority to ensure sustained QA in the region?

5.6 Intercontinental quality assurance and recognition of qualifications

Intercontinental quality assurance encompasses continental initiatives and collaborative frameworks aimed at improving and ensuring the quality of higher education across countries. These initiatives seek to establish standards, share good practices, and create mechanisms for recognizing and accrediting educational institutions and qualifications globally. Their goal is to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across borders, support student and academic mobility, and improve the overall standards of education worldwide.

5.6.1 Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework

The [Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework](#) (PAQAF), endorsed by the African Union Commission, is an overriding framework for a number of commitments related to quality assurance harmonization activities in Africa. PAQAF serves as a guiding framework for quality assurance and accreditation across the continent.

The [Harmonization of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation](#) (HAQAA) initiative was established to support the development of a harmonised quality assurance and accreditation system at institutional, national, regional and Pan-African continental levels. It is funded by the European Union Commission, in the context of the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership. Phase one, HAQAA 1, was implemented from 2016–2018. HAQAA 2 (2019–2022) builds upon, upscales, and promotes the results of HAQAA1 and goes further in supporting African higher education integration. The general objective of the initiative is to improve the quality and harmonization of African higher education and support students' employability and mobility across the continent. The HAQAA3 (2023–2028) is currently under implementation.

Specific objectives of HAQAA 3:

- Quality assurance (QA) culture and quality enhancement in higher education institutions and capacities of quality assurance agencies and national / regional authorities are strengthened to develop, implement and use transparency tools such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) and African Credit Transfer System (ACTS).
- The capacities of quality assurance agencies and national / regional authorities are strengthened to promote mutual recognition of qualifications and accreditation, use of transparency tools and the setup of the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Alliance (PAQAA) is further developed.
- The capacity of the higher education sector (including policy makers) on issues related to evidence-based and informed policy making and regional integration is built, with a view to strengthen regional and continental integration, enhance the sector's responsiveness and contribution to socio-economic challenges.

The PAQAF has several tools and action lines which include:

- **African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA):** developed in 2017-2018 under the HAQAA Initiative, ASG-QA is a guiding document for QAAs and HEIs across the continent and is instrumental in fostering a shared quality culture, facilitating the cross-border recognition of quality assurance and accreditation decisions.
- **African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF):** still under development but aims to be an overarching qualifications framework and a catalyst for the development of national and regional QFs. The ACQF is underpinned by quality assurance.
- **African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM):** originally developed and endorsed by the African Union in 2007, revised and piloted in 2014 and in 2017. The AQRM is a quality assessment tool for higher education institutions in Africa and supports continuous quality improvement. The self-evaluation/self-rating survey that comprises the AQRM consists of institutional-level reference points. It should be noted that the AQRM is not a ranking instrument for comparing institutions and is not used to create league tables.
- **The Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States**, known as the Addis Convention, was adopted on 12 December 2014 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and entered into force on 15 December 2019. It is open to UNESCO Member States belonging to the African region and as of 2025, it has been ratified by 14 African State Parties and the Holy See.²¹

Under HAQAA 3, further tools under development include the African Credit Transfer System (ACTS) and Continental Registers for Quality Assurance Agencies.

As part of the HAQAA initiative, the [Pan African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Alliance](#) (PAQAA), an alliance that will be a major articulating body for the higher education sector on the African continent is under development. It is yet to be formally established, but extensive work has been done to pave the path for this establishment. A PAQAA technical unit hosted by the Association of African Universities under HAQAA 3 is in place to support the operationalisation of PAQAA.

5.6.2 African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA)

The ASG-QA has been designed to provide a comprehensive, continent-wide framework for quality assurance in African higher education. They are based on global principles but adapted to reflect the African educational context. These guidelines address both internal and external quality assurance processes. The ASG-QA aligns with broader regional and continental initiatives designed to improve higher education standards and support quality assurance efforts in Africa by contributing to strengthening existing agencies and frameworks and promoting the establishment of new agencies where applicable.

The African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) goal is to promote quality and relevance in African education, and QA is a key element of this strategy. The ASG-QA is designed to align with global quality assurance standards and frameworks such as those developed under the Bologna Process and international standards and guidelines developed by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). This alignment ensures that African institutions can participate in global academic exchanges, student mobility, and qualifications recognition. Annex 1, Figure 1, gives a pictorial view of the ASG-QA standards and guidelines. The ASG-QA standards were developed in HAQAA1 while the [User's Guide](#) was developed in HAQAA2 to further support the use of the ASG-QA.

²¹ Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Congo (Republic of), Djibouti, The Gambia, Guinea, Holy See, Liberia, Mauritius, Mauritania, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, Togo, and Zambia.



Key features of the ASG-QA

The ASG-QA is an African continental Quality Assurance Framework developed to support HEIs and quality assurance agencies (QAAs) in implementing good QA practices. It comprises three parts of quality assurance focusing on standards and guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance, External Quality Assurance and Internal Quality Assurance for Quality Assurance Agencies. The ASG-QA:

- Guides QAAs and HEIs in the application of standards and guidelines in higher education.
- Helps QAAs and HEIs to develop adequate internal QA mechanisms that fit international good practices.
- Assists QAAs and HEIs in assessing their own quality through self-assessment.
- Promotes the international competitiveness of Africa's higher education system.
- Provides a common framework and understanding of quality assurance systems for teaching and learning among all stakeholders at continental, regional and national levels.
- Fosters mutual trust thus facilitating recognition and mobility.
- Ensures quality improvement / enhancement in higher education on the African continent.
- Promotes transparency and accountability.
- Supports higher education institutions to develop a sustainable quality culture.

5.6.3 The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications. The process has created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) under the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This process provides benchmarking lessons for the African context.

5.6.4 The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

INQAAHE is a global association of organizations involved in the external quality assurance of higher education institutions. Established in 1991, INQAAHE aims to promote and enhance quality assurance processes across the world by providing a platform for cooperation, sharing good practices, and improving standards in higher education quality assurance.

5.6.5 African Continental Qualifications Framework- ACQF

ACQF is a dynamic community of countries and regions engaged in building a sustainable common area of trusted qualifications and credentials, supporting the achievement of the African demographic dividend, lifelong learning for inclusive and fair green and digital transformation, and mobility of learners and workers.

ACQF is underpinned by quality assurance

The ACQF as an overarching qualifications framework and a catalyst for the development of national and regional qualification frameworks is underpinned by quality assurance.

Quality assurance is fundamental for trust in qualifications, and for their currency and mobility (Castel-Branco and Allgoo, 2022). Guideline 5 of the ACQF deals with QA in the context of the ACQF providing, '... explanatory elements on the application of criterion 4 (on quality assurance) of referencing to ACQF. Moreover, the Guideline provides an initial proposal for a common continental quality assurance framework for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in a lifelong learning perspective.'

Quality assurance is the subject of Criterion 4 of referencing to the ACQF (Jaftha and Castel-Branco, 2022), stating that: 'the national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the national qualifications framework or system and is consistent with the principles of quality assurance of the ACQF'.

The ASG-QA is closely linked with the ACQF as elaborated in table 1 below:

ASG – QA	ACQF
Common framework for understanding QA	Common framework for understanding qualifications
Facilitate recognition of qualifications	Facilitate recognition of qualifications
Facilitates mobility of students and human resources	Facilitates mobility of learners, workers and services
Promotes transparency and accountability	Supports quality and transparency
Facilitates mutual trust	Facilitates mutual trust

Table 1: ASG-QA linkage to the ACQF (African Continental Qualifications Framework, 2024)

5.6.6 African Union Continental Education Strategy 2026 - 2035 (CESA 26-35)

The Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2026-35 (CESA 26-35) is a strategic framework that represents a significant step towards enhancing education across the continent, promoting quality and inclusive learning opportunities for all. This comprehensive strategy marks a pivotal advancement in promoting quality education across the continent, addressing the diverse needs of our populations and fostering sustainable development. The strategy embodies a shared responsibility to transform Africa's education systems into vehicles for equity, innovation, and sustainable development.

CESA 2026-35 incorporates findings from CESA 16-25 to provide a new framework for action for 2026-35. It is worth noting that CESA Strategic Action No.4 is on Higher Education and TVET with quality considerations under Objective #11: Expand access to and the quality of higher education. The role of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks continues to be pivotal at continental level.

5.7 Conventions supporting quality assurance and recognition of qualifications

The Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States, known as the Addis Convention, establishes a legal framework for the fair and transparent recognition of HE qualifications in the African region to facilitate mobility and inter-university cooperation. Supporting academic mobility and exchange among African States strengthens trust in the quality enhancement of institutions and systems, while also providing a pivotal network for advancing the SDG targets for equitable access in the region. The Parties, in the preamble, affirm that they are:

- Conscious of the need for quality, and to encourage institutions and national accreditation bodies to develop internal and external quality assurance mechanisms,
- Determined to organize and reinforce the recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas, degrees and other academic qualifications in higher education, as well as the management of quality by national, bilateral, regional and continental organizations that already exist, or which will be created for that purpose.



In November 2019, the [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#) was adopted by the 40th session of the UNESCO General Conference, becoming the first United Nations treaty on higher education with a global scope. The Global Convention establishes universal principles for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications, and qualifications giving access to higher education and offering avenues for further study and employment. With provisions on non-traditional learning modes, the Global Convention also facilitates the recognition of qualifications, prior learning and study periods earned remotely. In addition, it promotes the recognition of refugees' qualifications, even in cases where documentary evidence is lacking.

By ratifying the Global Convention, countries commit to strengthening international cooperation in higher education, raising its quality at home and worldwide, and helping make academic mobility and the recognition of qualifications a reality for millions around the world. 'Convinced that this Convention will promote international mobility, as well as communication and cooperation regarding fair and transparent procedures for recognition, and quality assurance and academic integrity in higher education at a global level!' (UNESCO, Global Convention)

Group exercise

Conventions on the recognition of qualifications with related initiatives like the ACQF are key enablers to enhancing quality assurance in higher education. Despite African Member States recognizing this, there has been a slow pace in adopting and ratifying these.

Discuss the state of play for your country, highlighting the following:

- Status of ratification of the Addis Convention and the Global Convention.
- Share issues of concern with the ratification process.
- How can existing convention structures assist your country in achieving the ratification milestone?

Annex 1: Relevant resources

Note:
 IQA – Internal Quality Assurance
 EQA – External Quality Assurance
 QAA – Quality Assurance Agency

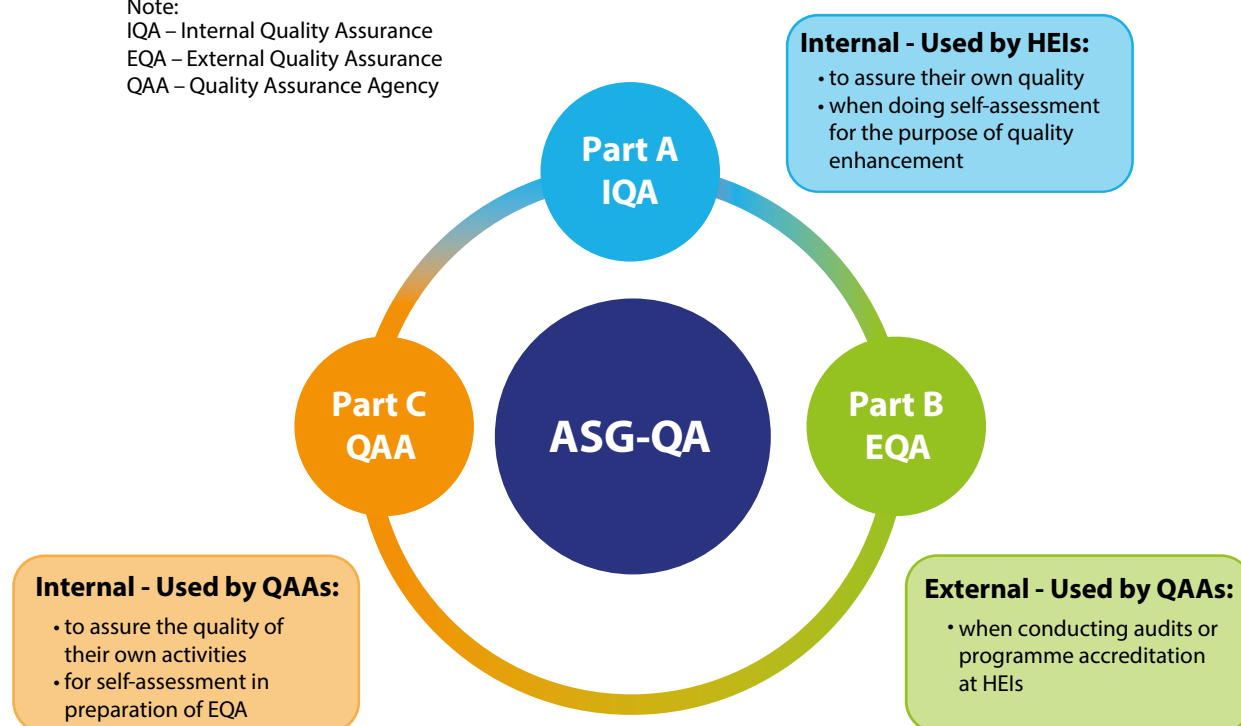


Figure 1: Interlinkage of the three parts of the ASG-QA (HAQAA3, 2025)



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Internal Quality Assurance Handbook for Higher Education in Africa

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