

Executive Summary

The purpose of this research was to explore the state of play of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) amongst higher education institutions in the SADC from the perspective of regional stakeholders working in the higher education sector. The key findings, summarised below, clearly indicate the importance of monitoring the implementation of IQA and identified the areas for SARUA to include in its future capacity development programmes. In addition, the research highlights the value attached to forming a SARUA Community of Practice (CoP) to provide a forum for discussion and ongoing support amongst QA practitioners in the region. The findings of this research show that while IQA systems are in place in most institutions and there is a considerable understanding of the technical aspects which underpin the success of an IQA system, there is a challenge in implementing institutional-level management of change to allow the embedding of a shared quality culture.

Main purpose of IQA

Supporting the delivery of quality education was seen as the main purpose of IQA, along with ensuring that the institution achieves its mission and strategic objectives. The importance of building a quality culture, supporting continuous improvement, meeting the needs of students, staff and stakeholders, and ensuring that the IQA is fit for purpose were also highlighted. It was clear that institutions across the region are at different stages in terms of implementing and reviewing their IQA systems and that, in this regard, their response to their national contexts (higher education needs, employability, external standards) has been an important influence. There is also a contrast between those institutions which have been focusing on compliance and those which see the need to have IQA systems that are flexible, dynamic, and forward-looking.

Drivers of IQA

Compliance with the expectations of external quality assurance (EQA) agencies was seen as an important driver for IQA, whether at programme or institutional level. Participants in the research highlighted the importance of an institution's mission and vision, meeting student needs and the intention to attract international partners. Research, rankings, and third-stream income were seen as slightly less important drivers of IQA. Respondents also included an HEI's reputation, risk management and attraction of students/retention of staff as potential drivers of the quality agenda.

Management and implementation of IQA

Systematic collection and analysis of key data is needed to underpin the management and implementation of IQA and to support the monitoring of institutional effectiveness. Some institutions use external quality standards such as ISO-9001 to provide a framework for IQA whereas others emphasised the importance of having comprehensive in-house documentation which is readily shared through an intranet or a staff portal. Committees have a clear role to play in facilitating communication and encouraging buy-in and a recurrent theme was the need for the implementation of IQA to be championed at the highest levels of the institution.

Locus of responsibility

Respondents underlined the importance of formalising the reporting structure to support IQA and ensure that the function was embedded in institutional systems. The role of the QA unit or department in the planning and coordination of the QA system was emphasised; in some institutions academic staff were seconded to QA positions and this approach was seen as being less successful in implementing IQA. From the research it is evident that representation of staff from QA units or departments on high level committees raises the status of quality assurance, and that this is key to success.

Key documentation

Respondents described a range of key documentation, including policies, frameworks, guidelines, and checklists as sources of information on IQA, while student and staff handbooks were seen as less helpful. Surveys and questionnaires are in use as tools for data collection. Some institutions were still in the process of creating key documentation whereas other institutions were reviewing and updating documentation to ensure that it was fit for purpose.

Ensuring access to data was highlighted as an area to be considered, as institutions needed to ensure that the right people could access the right information. Emails and committees were viewed as the most important dissemination methods, showing that channels that promoted two-way communication were seen as more supportive. Line managers have an important role to play, both in providing and withholding documentation.

Monitoring and evaluation

Externality clearly plays an important role in the monitoring and evaluation of IQA, whether by external examiners, analysing the results of EQA activities, or through professional programme accreditation. While surveys are a widely used tool, student course or module evaluations and internal audits seemed to be more highly valued. Student employability rates were not necessarily a useful measure of the effectiveness of the IQA system. What was less clear was how quality loops were closed and how changes made in response to feedback are communicated.

Facilitating factors

Factors which supported the successful implementation of IQA systems included support at the highest level of the institution, the identification and sharing of good practice, involvement of committees, teamwork, a highly functional data management system, clear channels of communication, and positive engagement with academic staff. Smaller institutions benefitted from informal opportunities to discuss or share practice and offer mutual support. One theme that was emphasised was the importance of training, whether facilitated internally or externally and the importance of non-QA staff undertaking IQA training

Barriers

Respondents identified a wide range of barriers which prevented the successful implementation of IQA. In most cases, these could be seen as the inverse to the facilitating factors and included: lack of support from management and unclear reporting lines; limited funding and poor communication; resistance to change; lack of training; lack of teamwork and a feeling of isolation amongst QA staff.

Suggestions for improvement/support

Suggestions for improvement/support included: training (certified and non-certified); opportunities for regular engagement between QA directors and the establishment of special interest groups; provision of online templates or resources; the development of a glossary to instil a shared understanding of QA terms; and the establishment of a good practice database for the SADC.