

## **Towards a Model of Internal Quality Assurance Evaluation in Moroccan Public Universities\***

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose-** In writing this article, I have two main goals in mind: first, to set up a tentative model of how to proceed in the task of evaluating internal quality assurance (IQA) in Moroccan public universities ; second, to raise the academics awareness about this issue and hopefully take advantage of some recommendations and implications, as suggested in this paper so as to implement IQA successfully, in compliance with the Quality Standards of the *National Agency for the Evaluation and QA in Higher Education*.

**Design/methodology/approach-** The study was carried out in the light of a mixed method approach (quantitative and qualitative). The qualitative approach (interviews with senior lecturers as well as document analysis) proved to be more insightful to highlight some pertinent issues in detail. The findings are decoded in the model of IQA evaluation, briefly suggested in this paper.

**Implications and recommendations-** It will be shown that an adequate fulfilment of IQA is a daunting task, especially for the academic staff whose main responsibility is to undertake their activities regularly, as required in order to comply with the national Quality Standards and gain accountability as well as the satisfaction of the head of the institution, the NAEQA in Higher Education and international QA agencies and organizations. The proposed model constitutes a strong recommendation to be endorsed so as to improve the image of the institution and gain national and international recognition.

**Originality/value-** The ultimate goal of this paper, which is adapted from my doctoral dissertation on the Academics' perceptions of IQA in Moroccan public universities (2022), has been to suggest a practical design to be strictly followed in process of evaluating IQA with the central focus on the whole teaching operation. This model may inspire university teachers and raise their awareness (about the crucial importance of IQA and how to implement it in the right way. As a point of departure, the discussion begins with a short introduction, followed by a succinct presentation of the complex concepts of "Quality" and "Quality Assurance" in Higher Education (HE).

**Keywords-** *Quality, internal Quality Assurance, Standards, Higher Education,*

**Paper type-** Research paper

### **Introduction**

Quality Assurance (QA) has recently become a common practice, which is endorsed by Higher Education (HE) institutions worldwide, due the pressure of internal and external forces. One of the aims of this quality movement is to make the contribution of university education to socio-economic

development highly significant. This entails that graduates are currently required have a high-quality profile, i.e., to be competent and master the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills needed in the labour market. This wave of change, which is mostly imposed by globalization and digitalization, has received special attention by educational executives and has the effect that university education should rather be learner-centred in order to satisfy the different needs of students and meet the expectations of other stakeholders. Such a shift of focus on the student learning outcomes has eventually led HE institutions to reconsider their strategic planning, their mission, the curriculum, the pedagogical competence of the academic staff,

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among other elements. To ensure that the overall institutional performance is on the right way, a QA system should be endorsed to assume this task of checking regularly the extent to which the set of standards of evaluation are strictly respected, as expected. This operation of IQA has the advantage of proving the accountability of the institution, gaining the trust of the public and enjoying an international recognition. This is the case of Moroccan public universities, the object of the present study. The significance of this contribution is to show that the conception of academic quality has changed in this digital age, and the urgent need to integrate a *unit* responsible for QA in every HE institution to ensure educational quality, enhance learners and achieve academic leadership. Let us then briefly consider the complex concepts of “Quality” and QA before dealing with the central goal of the paper mentioned above.

The most recent establishment of a Quality Assurance System by the *National Agency of Evaluation and Quality assurance* (NAEQA) (*Official Bulletin*, 2019) is a major event in the Moroccan Higher Education. It is intended to ensure academic quality on a national level in an objective way, based on a set of Standards and Guidelines. Such a national Quality Code has the advantage of consolidating accountability, gaining international recognition, and satisfying different stakeholders, in particular, Higher Education executives and employers.

The well-articulated Quality Code proposed by the NAEQA can serve evaluation at the institutional level (self-assessment); hence, it is referred to as Internal QA evaluation. The Quality Code can also be used by external agents of the NAEQA (External QA evaluation). However, it is left to individual institutions to set up a unified model to undertake the evaluation of programs systematically.

## **1- Defining ‘Quality’**

As a first methodological step, it is worth pointing out three major challenges to defining “quality”. The first challenge lies in the elusive nature of quality (Schindler et al. (2015, p.4)), since it has different interpretations, depending on the various perceptions of different stakeholders: administrative and academic staff, students, employers, the government, accrediting bodies, quality assurance agencies, etc. For example, most heads of institutions, as academic leaders, conceive quality in terms of teachers’ performance excellence, satisfactory program learning outcomes, and purposeful scientific research. The aim is to gain trust of the public and to make the institution visible on the national and international level. With regard to academics, they associate quality with the achievement of the teaching objectives as planned in the curriculum, and the students’ acquisition of the relevant knowledge and skills as embodied in the completed course and in conformity with academic standards (Cheng, 2011, p. 11). By contrast, students define quality in terms of the program in which they study, good academic instruction, the university that they attend, and especially the learning outcomes they acquire must satisfy their immediate needs. As concerns employers, they see quality as the mastery of the appropriate competencies and skills that enable graduates to perform their job in a professional way. The government too, which finances public/ state universities expects graduates to have a high quality profile to contribute effectively to the economic development of the country.

The second challenge to defining quality is linked to its multidimensional aspect (Green, 1994). As such, it seems impossible to capture all the dimensions of quality in one definition. The third challenge is that quality is not a static but rather a dynamic and changing quest for excellence to gain public trust and the satisfaction of all interested parties.

Other challenges that may come to mind when attempting to define quality concern the social, economic and political environment where education takes place. Equally important, the regional context of higher education does affect one’s conception of quality. This entails that quality is relative in its conceptualization and realization (Harvey & Green, 1993, p.10; Elassy, 2015). Thus, it is more likely that educational quality in the US is viewed differently from that in France, UK, or the state of Qatar, for example, due to different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the trend for innovation in higher education and dominance of information technology (IT) in the 21st century (Gibbs, B. et al., 2024) as well as the emergence of Artificial Intelligence have radically changed the parameters of quality assessment worldwide. Thus, the traditional conception of quality as “excellence” may not be adequate from the perspective of IT, which associates quality primarily with digital education. This amounts to saying that there is much more to be expected in defining academic quality in this high-tech era. With this background in mind, let us examine how “quality” was conceived by experts in Quality assurance.

As can be inferred from the above discussion, it is difficult to provide a unified definition of ‘quality’ in the context of higher education, simply because the target imagined stakeholders have different expectations from university graduates. Thus, given that there are various approaches to defining ‘quality’, I will limit myself to one prominent model often cited in the literature, proposed by Harvey and Green (1993). These authors attempt to define “quality” on the basis of five dimensions, namely, quality as excellence, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation. These concepts are briefly discussed below.

**1-**     *Quality’ as “excellence”*: this conceptualization conveys the idea of attaining an exceptional level of education and distinctiveness, as in the case of some prestigious universities like Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard, in terms of the special student experience that these institutions provide. However, this concept has been criticized by researchers interested in quality because it implies an unfair advantage of such ‘elite universities’ at the expense of other state universities that excel in their education but cannot attain the same reputation. Besides, this concept is not useful when it comes to evaluate quality in higher education as a whole (Green, 1994, p. 13). This trend of thought is advocated by the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) (2015), where quality is viewed simply as reaching a threshold level or the minimum standards agreed upon to facilitate comparability of educational programs and encourage student’s mobility across the European countries, which adhere to the framework of ESG. Thus, quality as excellence presupposes an ideal educational environment and is often used as a ‘slogan’ in many educational institutions to gain more reputation and attract students, but when it comes to practice, it is hard to achieve excellence in the true sense of the word.

**2-**     *‘Quality’ as “consistency or perfection ”*: it means that a set of standards are used to evaluate a particular case, which could be a product or a program, that is expected to be ‘perfect’, i.e., it exactly conforms with the norms and shows ‘zero defects’. This criterion is most relevant in the context of industry and marketing, for example, where detailed product specifications can be established and standardized measurements of uniform products can show conformity to them; but in higher education, this type of quality is unlikely to be achieved in the domain of knowledge of various types. Hence, the conception of quality as ‘perfection’ remains an ideal goal that cannot be properly attained in the context of HE institutions; therefore, it will be ignored in the present study, when examining “Quality Assurance”, the central theme of this paper.

**3-**     *‘Quality’ as “fitness for Purpose”*: it means that outputs in general, whether they are products, services or learning outcomes, should correspond to the needs of different stakeholders. In the context of higher education institutions, special attention is given to this dimension of quality because the current tendency is to relate university education to the socio-economic development. Many scholars such as

Green (1994) and Harvey (2006) advocate this idea. Ellis (1993) equates quality with “standards that must be met to achieve specified purposes to the satisfaction of customers. So, quality of teaching is its fitness for the purpose of promoting learning”. In other words, what is needed in the workplace is not necessarily excellence or perfection, but rather the minimum standards to assure the mastery of the relevant competencies and skills and the ability to use them appropriately in the workplace.

4- ‘Quality’ as “value for money” is often linked in higher education to an urgent demand for efficiency and effectiveness, as in the case of Harvard School and MIT in USA, and Oxford University in England. However, the act of associating money with higher education negatively affects the conventional perception of the university as having the noble mission of providing students with knowledge in different domains and developing their personality as prominent intellectuals.

5- ‘Quality’ as “transformation” entails a positive change in the whole institution, including a high productivity of the academic staff and a continuous enhancement of the learners expressed in different ways. It is this dimension of quality as transformation that will be placed under focus when considering QA in this paper. With this brief background information about the meaning of educational quality, it is possible to shift the attention to the concept of ‘Quality Assurance’, define it, specify its types, present the possible approaches adopted in its operationalization and finally move on to the Case study.

Higher education institutions are currently more concerned with quality assurance to safeguard the quality of their educational programs because of many factors, especially the wave of global economic change, due to technological developments and the need for 21st century skills to ensure the employability of graduates. Universities are required to change their strategic planning and adapt their curricula to meet the demands of the labour market. There is also the pressure of external forces such as international organizations like the UNESCO and quality assurance agencies that keep controlling educational quality worldwide and diffuse reports of their evaluation. This constitutes a threat to universities, which strive to maintain a good reputation and avoid public criticism.

Accordingly, HE institutions embrace QA as an obligation to establish confidence and trust for the government, which finances public universities and employers who seek highly skilled people in the workplace. In this respect, Harvey (2006) defines QA in higher education as “a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements” (p.14). This implies that QA has become the norm that regulates the overall performance of HE institutions while keeping in mind the expectations of all potential stakeholders.

In fact, QA is the result of “a growing demand for accountability and transparency . . . [which has] in turn led to a need to develop a quality culture, while addressing the challenges of globalized

higher education” (Ryan, 2015, p.2). In more concrete terms, QA systems are based on a set of guidelines and standards in the process of evaluating “the learning environment, including teaching and research with the aim of finding out whether the program under evaluation reaches an acceptable threshold quality” (Policy on Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016, p.2). A statement of the UNESCO (2004) supports this idea, where QA is conceived as “a systematic review of educational programs to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained”. This definition refers to programs that must be regularly assessed and satisfy some quality standards; academic performance and the institution’s infrastructure are equally important variables to assure educational quality.

In this regard, it is worthwhile to point out that the process of QA takes three different forms: from within the institution (internal QA), from outside, by educational executives on the national level (external QA), and from international QA agencies such as the European Standards and Guideline (ESG) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK. Each of these types has its specific standards and guidelines; however, they complement each other to come up with a reliable evaluation of QA (ESG, 2015, p.9). In fact, IQA systems aim at providing guidance to educational institutions to improve the quality of their academic program as well as the learning environment with the purpose of satisfying the requirements of external QA. The latter, in contrast, is control-oriented because the objective is make sure that the teaching quality of the institution under review complies with the academic standards recognized on the national level. The ultimate goal of EQA is to ensure accountability to stakeholders. With regard to International QA agencies, they are more rigid in their criteria of quality evaluation, as they check the findings of both the internal and external QA against their own international standards. The next sections will be devoted the three central goals of the paper each in turn.

## **2- The proposed Model of IQA evaluation in Moroccan Public Universities**

There are some insightful recommendations worth suggesting about the way IQA in Moroccan public universities could be put into practice and be more efficient. In this regard, I would like first to propose a tentative model of the IQA system in the form of a ‘strong’ recommendation that could be more inspiring to institutions, the academic staff, the NAEQA and researchers in the domain of quality assurance. This model is mostly inspired from eminent proposals outlined in the abundant literature on QA systems worldwide. (See in particular ESGs, 2015; the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2018: [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsandQuality/What-is-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsandQuality/What-is-quality)).

It is unquestionable that an effective evaluation of IQA in HEIs should be congruent with some unified standards of academic quality in order to reach reliable information that could be accepted by the EQA at the national level as well as international QA agencies and organizations. Specifically, IQA requires the application of a systematic procedure in the process of assessment. This idea is made clear enough by Martin & Stella (2007:37) who state that:

*Internal quality assurance refers to the policies and mechanisms in an institution or program to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular.*

This quotation is quite revealing as it shows that IQA does not operate ad hoc but rather it is constrained by a set of standards and guidelines to be strictly followed by the evaluating committee. In line with the relevant literature, I admit that the process of undertaking IQA evaluation appropriately involves two stages: a) an annual assessment and b) a periodic review of academic programs.

#### ❖ **The Annual Assessment**

Public universities are required to undergo an annual self-assessment, involving academic programs. The latter have to be developed in line with the standards of the NAEQA, while respecting some important elements that are necessary to undertake annual evaluation of IQA. These elements, which are crucially relied upon in the process of evaluation, include the six following steps:

- 1) A Program specification document, which is required from all programs and is a major component of the *Program File*. The program specification will document the conformity of the program design and specification with the framework of quality assurance in HE, as officially proposed by the NAEQA in coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education.
- 2) A course description of the subject with a clear and detailed study plan prepared by the teacher;
- 3) Students' course evaluation (survey);
- 4) The teacher's course evaluation, based on students' assessment;
- 5) A course file provided by the teacher, which includes all the activities covered in the classroom during a given semester;
- 6) Head of Program evaluation.

The office or unit in charge of IQA in public universities considers all these elements in the process of evaluation. The overall evaluation is eventually submitted to the Dean.

❖ **Periodic Review of Academic Programs:**

This periodic review takes place within the institution. It aims to examine and evaluate the program's academic provision, the quality of the teaching-learning process, the experience of the students, the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and any relevant challenges and priorities that need to be settled. The ultimate goal is to make sure that the academic programs of public universities match with pre-defined standards. Interestingly enough, public universities are supposed to adopt a regular self-assessment strategy for the sake of objectivity and transparency.

The periodic review is performed in conformity with the following set of standards adapted from international QA agencies and best practices (See also the document of the *Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Quality Assurance*, referred to above).

- **Standard 1:** The Academic Program: This standard requires that the program should reflect a clear mission and well-defined objectives, an adequate architecture of the program, specifying the intended CLOs and PLOs.



- **Standard 2:** It concerns students: their selection for the department (if possible) as well as the evaluation of their performance must be based on sound and unified criteria.
- **Standard 3:** Faculty: Faculty members in the program should display a high academic quality and professionalism and contribute to the constant improvement of the program by innovative methods and relevant materials.
- **Standard 4:** Facilities and Learning Resources: This standard is related to the availability of a good infrastructure: classrooms well equipped with the relevant information and communication tools, offices for the academic staff, and abundant library resources. These elements are necessary to motivate staff and students, and create a highly favorable learning environment that can boost productivity and ensure teaching and learning quality.

The Periodic Review of Academic Programs takes these standards as a means of evaluation, making a distinction between the different variables that contribute to IQA. The operation involves a self-study activity performed by faculty members, students, directors/coordinators of the program. With the assistance of an evaluation committee, the chair of IQA in particular carefully examines such activities and ends up with a general evaluation of all programs. The chair also provides a detailed evaluation report on all academic programs to be subsequently submitted to the head of institution (Dean / vice Dean/Director). The overall IQA evaluation will ultimately be subject to external QA assessment. With this background information in mind, let us next focus the attention on some other related and valuable recommendations to be taken into account.

### 3- Other Recommendations

There are five main recommendations that are worth suggesting:

**Firstly**, the need to set up an independent office or unit exclusively responsible for the regular management of IQA at the institutional level, as required by the NAEQA (see *Quality Standards*, 2019). The *unit* is expected to be run by a committee of selected by the head of the institution and his Vice-Deans. The committee consists of members from the academic staff that represent different departments, in addition to a few members from the administration who know about Quality Assurance. The committee is supposed to be chaired by a senior professor who is more qualified in the domain of teaching quality and QA management. The tasks of the committee mainly consist of:

- Providing suggestions to improve QA areas in the institution, such as recommending workshops, seminars and other activities;

- Reviewing the annual reports of academic programs;
- Preparing for the external review of academic programs;

**Secondly**, heads of public universities (Presidents, Deans, Directors) have to raise the faculty members' awareness of the crucial importance of IQA and the requirement of their contribution to make it more effective. More specifically, they have to put IQA into practice, in conformity with the *Quality Standards and Guidelines* as set up by the NAEQA. This operation has the advantage of improving both the reputation of their institution and their self-image. Moreover, EQA evaluation cannot take place in the absence of a well-managed and valid IQA system.

**Thirdly**, the key to success for the implementation of IQA involves the need to establish an independent *unit* in charge of transmitting information of different types and the availability of the internet to assure a strong communication network in the institution, where all the academic staff (and not only the heads of programs/departments) are always in direct contact with the administration and the office of IQA. In brief, all teachers should keep informed about any event and especially the unit of IQA; and they are also held responsible for not being accessible to perform any required task related to IQA achievement on time.

**Fourthly**, to boost further the internationalization strategy by (adapting the content of programs to relevant international subjects in response to the most current needs of the emerging market economy).

**Finally**, to encourage partnerships through international networks, exchange programs, and involve national organizations such as l'association Marocaine pour amelioration de la Qualite de l'Enseignement (AMAQUEN), and external QA agencies (such as QAA of the UK and ENQA) in the implementation and regular updating of the national QA system. This policy of "learning from others" (e.g. experts from western universities and specialists from international QA agencies) and taking advantage of their valuable findings regarding their proposals of standards that highly guarantee academic quality at the international level is absolutely a healthy phenomenon to the Moroccan higher education. At this point, it is worth indicating that the task of implementing IQA evaluation regularly is quite demanding and requires the academic staff to be very active in their performance as they are evaluated by students; they are also required to submit a report based on the students' evaluation to the head of the QA Unit for further evaluation before submitting all the reports to the Dean/the Director.

#### 4- Some implications

The main implications that could be drawn from the above discussion include the following:

-First, quality in HE is difficult to define and measure; quite related to this point is the difficulty to delimit the scope of QA, whether internal or external. This is attributed to the fact that the evaluation of QA crucially depends on the definition of quality as excellence, fitness for purpose, threshold, etc. Besides different stakeholders have different objectives to attain. While some evaluators focus on institutional management, others pay attention to processes, programs and learning outcomes. Evaluators could go further to cover all these aspects, as in the case of EQA, or limit themselves to students' learning outcomes to see if they fit for specific purposes to match with the demands of employers. But generally, the evaluation of academic quality has been undertaken to serve to purpose of "*compliance (with Quality Standards) and accountability and has contributed little to the improvement of the student learning experience*" (Harvey and Newton, 2004). In this study, the investigation of IQA concentrated more on *processes* and their impact on *learning outcomes* because the ultimate goal of IQA evaluation ideally goes beyond the first two elements stated in the above quote to include the enhancement of learning, as it is more improvement -oriented with its predominant focus on the quality of teaching and learning aspects.

-The second implication, which derives from the first one is that without the support of heads of university institutions to the academic staff, IQA in teaching and learning is unlikely to be undertaken properly (Seyfied & Pohlenz, 2018). This implies that faculty members should be given due appreciation by the Deans/Directors of their schools. In fact, university teachers rather feel a sense of effectiveness when they are fairly treated by the head of their institution, who is supposed to be a build understanding as a step to develop trust among faculty members (Gibbs, B. et al.,2024, p:6). Such a nourishing environment is more likely to raise the academic staff's morale, boost their performance, and eventually contribute to developing a quality culture in the whole institution.

-The third implication of the research findings, which directly concern the academic staff, regardless of any kind of support, is their obligatory commitment to participate actively and use relevant material and innovative pedagogical approaches that could enable students develop critical thinking and creativity, among other key skills. They are also required to be 'visible' in the institution by being active to develop graduate programs, participate in meetings, conferences, etc.

-The fourth implication to be deduced from the discussion of the results involves students. They are required to master the skills on demand because most graduates, especially from the schools of humanities could be 'overqualified' in the subjects that they have been taught but not necessarily fit for particular careers, which often involves the mastery of soft skills among others in the execution of complex tasks both in the public and the private sector.

-The fifth and most important implication that should not be overlooked is that IQA in public universities has been regulated by the conventional national pedagogical norms. It is only recently that the gap of national ‘quality standards’ has been filled with the creation of the NAEQA which has established a National Quality Assurance Framework characterized by a well-articulated set of *Quality Standards*. The latter, which have been developed in conformity with European standards and guidelines (ESGs), are officially documented in the *Official Bulletin* in (2019).

## Conclusion

Before setting up a tentative model of how to undertake IQA properly, it was shown that is difficulty to define and measure quality, which is relative. Additionally, it was pointed out that the scope of QA evaluation depends on the adopted meaning of “quality” depending on the nature of the institutions and their missions. Equally important is the responsibility of the academic staff. Regardless of any kind of support, their obligatory commitment to participate actively in the implementation of IQA and also use relevant material and innovative pedagogical approaches that could enable students develop critical thinking and creativity, among other key skills. Finally and most importantly, without the support of heads of university institutions to the academic staff, IQA in teaching and learning is a ‘*toothless tiger*’ (Seyfied & Pohlenz, 2018). This negative metaphor means that there is no guarantee to assure the expected educational quality if faculty members are not given due appreciation by the Deans/Directors of their institutions.

Thus, the aim of this paper has been to highlight the importance of IQA in public universities so as to ensure accountability. To this end, an attempt has been made to provide a tentative model of how to undertake IQA at the institutional level, since its implementation is required both for programs’ improvement and external evaluation by the NAEQA. The main responsibility for the achievement of IQA is in the hands of the academic staff, who have to follow the standards and guidelines regularly; otherwise, there is no way to evaluate academic quality, leading to problems for EQA evaluators, who crucially need an accurate (periodic or annual) report of institutional self-assessment when they visit the target public universities. Other factors that contribute to the success of IQA implementation are embodied in the recommendations mentioned above.

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