

Internal Quality Assurance and Management

How to close the loop between evidence and decision-making

Overview

In many countries, internal quality assurance (IQA) of higher education focuses predominantly on teaching and learning. However, it can also support the assessment and improvement of university management. Indeed, management effectiveness is an important element underlying the quality of core higher education activities (i.e. teaching, research, and services). There are specific IQA tools to improve university management, and all IQA tools support management through feeding evidence into decision-making, to support strategic planning.

University case studies from research on IQA conducted by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) analysed existing IQA practices and factors that condition the effectiveness of IQA in higher education institutions (HEIs) in eight countries. Drawing from the research data, this brief explores how IQA can integrate management concerns and contribute to an institutional quality culture. It also presents strategies for universities to enhance IQA tools and processes.

How to link IQA and management

Internal quality assurance (IQA) is related to higher education management in two key ways. First, it provides evidence for decision-making for improvement purposes, with a view to ‘closing the loop’ between the generation of data and their use. Higher education institutions (HEIs) must ensure that IQA does not remain a standalone function, but connects to strategic planning, management, and resource allocation, so that the evidence obtained may feed into academic and administrative decision-making.

Second, although IQA focuses mainly on improving teaching and learning, it can also be used to assess and improve management effectiveness. Since the effective functioning of academic core activities is partly dependent on good university management, improving the latter can be a crucial lever for quality enhancement.

Which IQA tools for management support IQA processes effectively?

IIEP’s research identified performance target agreements, internal and external evaluation of units, and certification as the most frequently used IQA tools used to enhance management effectiveness in the eight universities studied. These instruments were designed to support the institution as a whole – its academic and administrative units, and academic and administrative staff.

Performance targets (sometimes referred to as goal agreements) are among the IQA tools found in a well-structured management system. They were identified in IIEP’s research as being highly effective for improving academic and administrative operations and service orientation. Performance targets or goal agreements can be developed at the levels



University of Bahrain



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for Educational Planning

Box 1. Internal goal agreement as an IQA management tool at WU, Austria

The Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU) – specialized in economics and business administration – is the fourth largest public university in Austria, and was among the first in the country to introduce a formal IQA system. WU employs a wide range of instruments that aim to foster a quality culture. Internal goal agreements – one of the main IQA instruments related to management processes – are agreed upon every three years by the rector’s council and academic departments. The agreements cover quantitative and qualitative goals in the areas of teaching and research. For many academic staff, this tool is important for university development, and for ensuring the improvement of academic programmes through evidence-based decision-making processes. Furthermore, the tool helped WU to prioritize predictable workloads of internal projects. Nonetheless, its benefits were more evident in the strategic planning of academic units, rather than in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative units. This limited impact could be explained by the initial design of goal agreements, which omitted the administrative units.

of academic and administrative units, and of their staff. This tool aims to align the operation of staff or units with the institutional strategic plan, while encouraging the management of tasks in a participative and mutually agreed manner. To illustrate, university leadership and academic and administrative units participate in a negotiation process to determine performance targets based on the university’s strategic plan. This process includes the activities to be performed, the time involved for each task, and criteria for self-evaluation. A similar procedure can be applied when academic and administrative staff formulate personal targets in relation to unit objectives. The process repeats in annual or multi-annual cycles, depending on the existing university administrative processes.

Internal evaluation of administrative units is essential to the IQA of the central administration and decentralized administrative units, as it complements goal agreements and performance targets. This IQA instrument is used in certain universities to analyse individual or unit performance against existing goals or targets. This process can

be implemented by an internal structure for oversight or evaluation that supports administrative units in the preparation of their self-assessment, and that monitors personal or unit performance. Each unit is typically responsible for generating a self-evaluation report. Peer reviews may follow self-evaluations to enhance assessment objectivity and widen the scope of recommendations. In some cases, improvement plans

are proposed as a follow-up to the assessment.

Finally, some HEIs are carrying out the certification process of their management or of specific technical units (e.g. those handling food), through the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), as a way to reform and standardize the work of administrative units. The evaluation process typically involves the submission of a report and a presentation to an expert evaluation panel, as demonstrated by the University of Bahrain, which submitted its management certification to the Bahrain Excellence Model (BEM).

Closing the loop at three levels

Linking IQA results with decision-making should close the loop at three levels: individual teaching performance, academic programmes, and strategic planning for the entire university.

First, at the individual teaching performance level, information generated from IQA tools such as student course evaluations

Box 2. 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.

Box 3. Improving teaching performance at XMU, China

Xiamen University (XMU) is a prominent research university with a student enrolment of 36,000 (2014). It covers multiple disciplines such as humanities, social and human sciences, engineering, and medicine in China. XMU has restructured its administration into a two-tier structure between universities and colleges. Schools and colleges have full operational autonomy to use university resources to manage their programmes as they see fit. To illustrate, the School of Management has linked teacher salaries to student course evaluations – higher ratings lead to increased teacher remuneration. XMU’s decentralized approach allows schools and departments to have more flexibility and greater autonomy in teacher management, while also providing each college with guidance to set teaching performance criteria based on a quality manual for teaching at the university.

can help improve teacher performance, particularly among young faculty members with less experience. Indeed, results from IQA tools should feed into annual or multi-annual performance evaluations of individual staff and should be linked to opportunities for staff development, with a view to remedying shortcomings in teaching performance.

Second, at the academic programme level, data generated from IQA tools and university statistics on student progression, completion, and labour market entry can support evidence-based dialogue when an academic programme is evaluated. Information from IQA tools and processes should feed into a discussion on quality between internal and external stakeholders to generate suggestions for necessary programme changes. Written reports presenting the results of the stakeholder dialogue on quality should be disseminated to the university’s hierarchy (e.g the dean of faculty, university president, and quality management office) to ensure follow-up and resource allocation, in line with identified requirements for improvement.

Third, at the university strategy level, results from internal and external evaluations of goal achievement and management

effectiveness can help enhance efficiency in administrative decision-making at the central university level. This helps establish consensus between university leadership and academic or administrative units (or both) on future strategic plan priorities, in the form of performance target/goal agreements. This helps achieve a close integration of the IQA process within the university’s management system, and supports the development of a quality culture in the university.

Recommendations

Clear lessons from IIEP’s research can be taken to maximize the effectiveness of IQA instruments for improving management and ‘closing the

loop’, including the following four main recommendations for policy-makers:

Integrate IQA with overall strategic planning

When IQA is connected to strategic planning, it has greater potential to influence decision-making and create change. For university stakeholders, strategic planning provides a framework of values and objectives that guides IQA in its goals, missions, tools, and processes. IQA tools generate data and provide evidence for multi-year planning and resource allocation. Linking performance evaluation with target agreements provides an incentive for goal achievement and a better basis for future planning.

Connect IQA results with other management areas

In addition to connecting IQA and strategic planning, it is important to envisage links between IQA and human resource development, curriculum design, data management, and organizational development. In some case universities, analyses of IQA results were combined with staff development opportunities. This increased support for IQA in decentralized units, and also

Box 4. A support structure to balance centralized coordination and decentralized responsibility at UoB, Bahrain

In response to increasing student numbers, the University of Bahrain (UoB) – the country’s only national university – established an evidence-based IQA system to improve the quality of its academic programmes. UoB set up a support structure for IQA that aims to balance centralized and decentralized IQA procedures. It is coordinated at the central level by the university’s Quality Assurance and Accreditation Centre (QAAC). QAAC, as an executive committee, constitutes an effective structure for managing, monitoring, and harmonizing IQA processes, such as designing policies, tools, and timelines implemented at the decentralized level. This gives colleges and departments greater autonomy to apply IQA instruments to improve the quality of their programmes in annual cycles of continuous improvement. Data, generated from all levels, are analysed, and then reported to university leadership.

contributed to greater participation of staff in these efforts. Linking IQA results to key management areas is a key tool for developing an effective and coherent management system, oriented towards continuous quality improvement.

Establish a balance of central and decentralized responsibilities for IQA

In order to lead effective change, IQA needs a considerable amount of decentralized authority at the department and college level. The research found that significant improvement occurred in decentralized structures where authority for IQA was delegated to lower levels of management

with greater decision-making over academic concerns, such as teaching and learning methods and assessment tools. However, authority for setting a university-wide IQA policy may be retained by the central administration, in order to guide the process, and provide support to units implementing and using the tools. The central level can also disseminate IQA good practices to different units at the university.

Provide leadership support for effective guidance of IQA

The research identified leadership support as crucial for effective IQA. Both academic and administrative staff said leadership support was necessary to facilitate

the integration of centralized and decentralized management of IQA. This support includes designing a clear structure of responsibilities for IQA, establishing policies and procedures, determining a timeline for IQA operations, and also providing training to decentralized units to promote decision-making at programme and college levels, and ensuring implementation and follow-up. This can help central management to ensure that IQA tools and processes are visibly implemented across various structures and units, and promote accountability in decentralized units. Thus, universities can achieve balance between centralization and decentralization in their IQA systems.

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