



## **Acculturated Internal Quality Assurance as an Enabler as Well as a Product of Integrity, Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Educational Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

*Internal quality assurance (IQA) structures and practices exist in many higher educational institutions (HEIs) globally. However, the existence of IQA mechanisms, though necessary, is insufficient to guarantee excellent delivery of quality products and services. There is need to acculturate internal quality assurance in order to realize and sustain excellence, efficiency and effectiveness in HEIs. Acculturated IQA refers to a consistent and shared commitment and adherence to relevant standards and requirements that is demonstrated not merely by documented information in an organisation but also through actual work performance and service delivery. What is stated or professed is followed through in practice. When IQA is acculturated, concern with quality becomes intrinsic and an ongoing process rather than an external imposition by quality assurance agencies. Alignment to goals, planning, monitoring and evaluation and use of objective evidence to guide decision making are cherished as efficient and effective tools for enhancing excellence. This paper utilizes philosophical methods of analysis and argumentation as well as internal quality assurance experiences and practices to clarify the concept of acculturated quality assurance and demonstrate how it both enables and reflects organisational excellence, efficiency and effectiveness.*

**Key Concepts:** Acculturated quality assurance, integrity, excellence, efficiency, effectiveness

### **Introduction**

In this paper, acculturated quality assurance refers to a consistent and shared commitment and adherence to relevant standards and requirements that is demonstrated not merely by documented information in an organisation but also through work performance and service delivery. When quality assurance is acculturated, adherence to standards and requirements becomes a shared

responsibility and a way of life in an organisation.

Integrity refers to consistent adherence to quality requirements in theory and practice. It means that what is confessed matches what is done and what is promised in service charters is faithfully delivered in actual practice. Excellence refers to outstanding performance which is an outcome of efficient use of resources in relation to effective achievement of a goal. Effectiveness refers to the degree to which actions, decisions, judgements and events succeed to achieve the intended outcome(s). It is outcome oriented since its purpose is goal achievement. Efficiency refers to the extent to which resources are expended in pursuit of achievement of pre-determined goals. It is resource oriented and its purpose is to minimise or eliminate wastage.

### **The Place of Higher Education in Society**

The significance of higher education in Society is not in doubt. Lewis (2017) for instance states that higher education is the foundation on which overall global development agenda is laid. The reason given for this claim is that HEIs generate new ideas, innovations, and research that are used in diverse sectors to create and sustain a cohesive and fair society. HEIs are also responsible for teacher education and thus determine how all levels of education are managed. Excellence, efficiency and effectiveness are necessary to ensure that HEIs do not disappoint in delivering their noble duty.

Often HEIs provide consultancy services to global and national policy making and implementation agencies. Efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs are therefore critical as they determine how well global and national initiatives are formulated, articulated and implemented. The fate of HEIs is therefore closely interlinked with the fate of society.

As Martin (2018) aptly observes, HEIs are exposed to rapid and constant change and transformation leading to expansion and diversification of institutions and programs. Consequently, the quality and relevance of HEIs is being critically interrogated. One way of addressing the emerging questions on quality and relevance is development of the habit of self -assessment and correction through internal quality assurance. Self-assessment and correction require integrity and the courage to face institutional lapses and shortcomings in a forthright and constructive way. For this to succeed, internal quality assurance needs to be enculturated making integrity, excellence, efficiency and effectiveness encouraged, supported and rewarded in HEIs.

### **Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Educational Institutions Globally and Locally**

Internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to a planned and deliberate internal process of determining the extent, to which specified requirements are being met, maintained and enhanced (Hayward, 2006). IQA structures and practices exist in many higher educational institutions (HEIs) globally. IIEP (2017) asserts that IQA systems have become widespread catalysts of higher educational reform. Using case studies drawn from Universities in China, Germany, Kenya, South Africa, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Chile and Austria, it is demonstrated how internal quality assurance systems are used to ensure that applicable standards of education are met and continually enhanced.

Martin (2018) observes that IQA in many HEIs are initially externally driven. Consequently, there is need to own the IQA mechanisms and enculturate them in order to make adherence to quality

requirements self-prescribed, well understood, accepted and appreciated. Information collected through IQA mechanisms needs to feed into and inform planning, resource allocation and decision making. According to Temrat (2019), IQA mechanisms are critical for self-reflection and institutional improvement besides enabling adherence to accreditation requirements by external regulatory bodies.

In the East African region, the East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN) brings together quality assurance practitioners from higher educational institutions across Eastern Africa and it enjoys the support of Inter University Council of East Africa (IUCEA). IUCEA is an association bringing together individual universities as well as national institutions overseeing higher education in East Africa. It also has close links with international institutions interested in the promotion of quality assurance globally such as German Academic Exchange Service (Khamis, 2016).

In Kenya, public and private universities, have internal quality assurance mechanisms. The Commission for University Education (CUE) approves establishment of universities in Kenya. It oversees standardisation, accreditation, governance and supervision of university education. The Commission has put in place elaborate standards and guidelines for universities in Kenya, outlining how teaching, research and community service mandates are to be executed. In addition, a performance management system established by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology is in place. The system commits public universities to mutually agreed performance targets. Kenya Universities Quality Assurance Network (KUQAN) brings together the university fraternity in Kenya to interrogate and set the quality agenda for universities in Kenya.

### **Insufficiency of Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

Although IQA mechanisms exist and are necessary, they are insufficient to guarantee institutional excellence, efficiency and effectiveness. When IQA is not enculturated, emphasis is put on mere compliance. Mere compliance refers to ‘mechanical’ adherence to standards and rules established by external authorities without necessarily making sense of the rules. Such adherence is not accompanied by owning the requirements and taking full responsibility for their implementation. The standards are considered as externally imposed rather than essential attributes that are well understood and accepted as inevitable and desirable for quality service delivery.

Without acculturation of quality, IQA mechanisms lose their potent value and relevance. They are deprived their transformative power thus becoming meaningless routines that are burdensome and unhelpful. Instead of being continual value adding processes, they are reduced to barren events that are costly to the HEIs. In such circumstances, the value of IQA as enriching and fulfilling individual and institutional practices is lost and quality assurance activities are received with suspicion as attempts to find fault and apportion blame (Wokabi, 2019).

To be well enculturated, IQA mechanisms need to be sensitive and customized to institutional context rather than merely seek to ‘copy and paste’ alien arrangements that are indifferent to local needs and aspirations as articulated by Cardoso et al. (2017).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Internal quality assurance (IQA) structures and practices exist in many higher educational institutions (HEIs) globally. However, the existence of IQA mechanisms, though necessary, is insufficient to guarantee excellent delivery of quality products and services. This is especially the case when institutions focus on mere compliance to minimum standards and lack interest and motivation to pursue excellence, efficiency and effectiveness by not only satisfying but also exceeding stakeholder requirements and expectations. When quality assurance is not acculturated, it is regarded as an imposition by external agencies, an unfriendly and intrusive event by quality auditors and agencies rather than an ongoing and enriching process of self-assessment and improvement. The position taken in this paper is that acculturated quality assurance is not only desirable but indispensable for institutional prosperity and sustainability. It is both an enabler and an outcome of integrity, excellence, efficiency and effectiveness.

## **The objectives of the study**

This paper aims at:

- a) Articulating the necessity of acculturation of internal quality assurance for institutional excellence and sustainability
- b) Clarifying how acculturation of internal quality assurance is both an enabler as well as an outcome of integrity, excellence, efficiency and effectiveness

## **Research Methodology**

This paper utilizes philosophical methods of analysis and argumentation as well as internal quality assurance experiences and practices to clarify the concept of acculturated quality assurance and demonstrate how it both enables and reflects organisational excellence, efficiency and effectiveness. Philosophical analysis is a critical and reflective attempt to understand the world by carefully extracting meaning from statements used to describe phenomena and experiences. This may involve conceptual analysis that clarifies meanings of terms laying bare the underlying assumptions, contexts and implications. Analysis of arguments raised in support of particular positions help in evaluating the correctness of the arguments. It helps in isolation conclusions made and the support provided for them. When this is done, the truth of statements used as well as evaluation of the validity and soundness of the arguments made can follow. Philosophical analysis, therefore helps us understand the basis of judgements we make. Quality assurance involves making judgements about whether or not stipulated requirements have been fulfilled. It also indicates where improvements are needed. The quality assurance process is therefore inevitable critical and analytical and the philosophical method was suitable.

## **Acculturation of Internal Quality Assurance**

Acculturation is a very important institutional strategy for enhancing team work, collaboration, synergy and collective focus on delivering quality service organizational settings. The United States Army (2014) provides a very good model for acculturating internal quality assurance. The United States Army has an employee acculturation handbook that introduces the institution to new employees. In the handbook, the employees are given big picture (The nature and function

of the United States Army) and the details that compose it (the structure, values, services, norms, responsibilities, expectations, duties, and rights of employees. The interdependent relationship between the employer and employees is clarified and justified). The importance of individual contribution to the fulfillment of the institutional mission is emphasized. The risks, opportunities and rewards involved in military service are discussed. The employee is invited to participate in team through thought, speech and deeds. The handbook demonstrates a deliberate effort to build a team spirit, and nurture loyalty, commitment and trust. Professional requirements, communities of practice, and other entitlements are shared. Employees are urged to internalize the contents of the handbook and seek clarification about any aspect of the work life that they have concerns about. It is evident that the handbook conveys a message intended to be practiced and lived rather than merely being documented on paper.

According to Cardoso, Rosa, Videira and Amaral (2017), IQA mechanisms need to be well adapted to the needs and aspirations of institutions and their membership. Sensitive to institutional context requires continual consultation, monitoring and evaluation of processes and their outcomes in order to identify areas in need of improvement. This consultative and responsive relationship facilitates harmonization of individual and institutional values and goals. It makes pursuit of quality a personal as well as an institutional objective.

According to Temrat (2019), IQA mechanisms facilitate self-reflection and institutional improvement. When they are internalized and acculturated, they become integrated into individual and institutional work life. Rather than being considered an imposition, they are regarded as indispensable means for achieving individual and institutional goals besides enabling adherence to accreditation requirements by external regulatory bodies.

There is need to acculturate internal quality assurance in order to realise and sustain excellence, efficiency and effectiveness in HEIs. Acculturation of internal quality assurance refers to the process of learning ways of working, and relating with others that are consistent with stated and implied requirements and standards. In the context of HEIs, it involves developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and habits that enable persons to consistently strive to meet specified research, teaching, learning and community service requirements. Some of the elements that demonstrate acculturation of quality in HEIs include the habit of self-reflection and improvement by management, staff and students; clarity of and harmony between individual as well as institutional purposes; appreciation of the relevance of processes and systems; willingness to take responsibility by all stakeholders; willingness to collaborate in order to achieve planned goals; readiness to accommodate and integrate diverse perspectives; and readiness to adapt imaginatively to new research, teaching, learning and community outreach contexts (Blackstock et al., 2010)

Acculturation of internal quality assurance requires HEIs to consider externally imposed requirements as mere minimum standards that can and should be transcended. As minimum standards, excellence demands that they be continually transcended. Once commitment to quality is self-prescribed, the institution has to develop, implement, review and improve her own quality assurance mechanisms and standards which are well understood, accepted and habitually used by her members.



## **Lessons from Internal Quality Assurance Experiences and Practices**

This section utilises internal quality assurance experiences and practices to clarify the concept of acculturated internal quality assurance and demonstrate how it both enables and reflects organisational excellence, efficiency and effectiveness.

Some challenges that have been observed by the researcher during internal quality audits include: considering monitoring and evaluation of quality as an event rather than a process; aversion to evaluation and correction by auditees; maintenance of a system of documents rather than a documented system; generation of data that is rarely analysed and utilised; non-internalization and application of documented strategic statements; and inadequate root-cause analysis, corrections and corrective actions.

Internal quality audits that appraise adherence to quality standards in HEIs are often considered as temporal events rather than ongoing processes that engage stakeholders to assess their commitment to quality service delivery. When this happens, excellence is compromised and the resources expended in quality audits are not effectively utilised. Monitoring and evaluation of quality ought to be an ongoing and shared responsibility that helps stakeholders in HEIs align their activities to achievement of goals. It also facilitates determination of the extent to which resources allocated are adequate and well utilised. The outcome of monitoring and evaluation activities facilitate justified and timely determination of needed improvements.

During internal quality assessments, non-conformities may be raised objectively but some employees become defensive and hostile to correction. This indicates a sense of insecurity and insincerity. When internal quality assurance is enculturated, quality audits and assessments are understood as tools that target evaluation and improvement of processes and systems as opposed to attacking persons. As such, they are tools for enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and excellence in an organisation. Consequently, auditees ought to be willing to be audited, open to corrections and eager to use the findings to continually improve processes and systems. Audits become a valued opportunity for innovation.

In many HEIs, one observes the tendency to have a system of documents in the form of policies, standard operating procedures, guidelines, rules and codes. Unfortunately, these documents are not consistent with what happens in the institution. In some cases, users of the documents are not aware of the contents of the documents. In other cases, since the documents are rarely referred to, they are not updated. Acculturated internal quality assurance requires that the habit of documenting processes and systems is necessitated by ensuring consistent use and evaluation of procedures, plans and methods. Consequently, documents are not made for the sake of it. Rather than create a system of documents, HEIs focus on documenting their systems to facilitate ease of reference, consistency in operations and decision making, measurement, monitoring and review of goals, decisions and activities. This facilitates but also enhances efficiency, effectiveness and excellence.

HEIs generate a lot of data related to service delivery and other activities. However, the data generated is not regularly analysed and interpreted in a way that it can guide decision making

and improvement. For instance, examination results are presented every semester, every year. However, in some institutions, analysis of examination data rarely informs in a direct and explicit way curriculum review, staff training and development, course lecturer evaluation, teaching workload, staff recruitment, procurement of teaching and learning materials and moderation of examinations. Poor performance is explained and dealt with in the absence of careful analysis and interpretation of relevant data. In order to achieve excellence, decision making ought to be factually grounded. Enculturated internal quality assurance therefore requires encouraging the habit of not only generating data but also analysing and using it to appraise and improve performance. Another challenge that the author has discerned is the fact that the noble strategic statements such as institutional vision, mission, quality policy statement, philosophy and values that are displayed in institutions are sometimes not well internalised and operationalised. Consequently, they largely remain on paper rather than embodied in institutional culture. These strategic statements ought to be lived and owned. They should reflect the actual, desired and approved way of thinking and doing things in the institution. As such the stakeholders, especially staff and students, should be able to relate with the statements and easily articulate in their own words, how their roles align with the statements. When this happens institutional and individual goals are connected and this enhances effective goal-achievement.

Ineffective analysis of root causes of non-conformities is another challenge that has been observed. This exposes the system to future recurrence of non-compliance. When root causes of non-conformities are not accurately identified, prescription of appropriate corrections and corrective actions is unlikely to be achieved. Enculturated internal quality assurance requires HEIs to foster the habit of systematic problem solving which requires root causes to be identified and dealt with and future recurrence prevented. This enhances efficiency and effectiveness since causes of errors are eliminated and more innovative and compliant ways of doing things are identified and implemented.

### **Acculturated Internal Quality Assurance as an Enabler of Integrity, Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Educational Institutions**

When IQA is acculturated thus becoming self-prescribed, appreciated and activated, it fosters transparency and regard for factual evidence. When truth, accuracy and objective evidence are pursued as useful guides to inquiry and decision making, integrity is promoted. Acculturated IQA habituates people to focus on issues not persons; address problems instead of blaming people. While deliberate wrong doing is shunned, unintended mistakes made while in pursuit of excellence in good faith is allowed. When such mistakes are made, people humbly own up instead of covering them up. It becomes a moment of learning and improvement. This encourages people to take risks and innovate in good faith without fear of retribution. This enables institutions to drive and manage change and improvement.

Acculturated IQA habituates people to continually interrogate their processes, procedure and plans with reference to their goals and available resources. Opportunities for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness are consequently sought and pursued. Institutions keep appraising emerging needs and opportunities, align their operations to their goals, and check the sufficiency of their resources to achieve planned objectives. The institution by so doing enhances its sensitivity to efficiency and effectiveness. Deviations from efficiency and effectiveness are quickly noted and rectified.

## **Acculturated Internal Quality Assurance as a Product of Integrity, Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Educational Institutions**

In addition to enabling integrity, efficiency and effectiveness, acculturation of IQA can be a product of integrity, efficiency and effectiveness. In institutions where integrity is implicitly and explicitly valued, encouraged, recognized and rewarded, staff and other stakeholders become habituated to act with integrity. Deception and fraud are demonstrated to be demeaning, unhelpful and out of place. The preferred way of doing things which becomes widely shared is transparent and honest. Acculturation of integrity is therefore achieved.

Institutions that are efficient and effective habituate their stakeholders to uphold efficiency and effectiveness as well. For instance, an educational institution that has a functional strategic plan habituates the lecturers and students to have their own plans as well that not only fit in the institutional plan but also support its implementation. Institutions that are known for keeping their promises faithfully and consistently also foster like habits among their stakeholders. That is why institutions build traditions that transcend generations through habituation and modeling. Acculturated IQA can be a product of entrenched institutional integrity, efficiency and effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has endeavoured to clarify the concept of acculturated internal quality assurance and demonstrate how it both enables and reflects organizational excellence, efficiency and effectiveness with reference to HEIs. Enculturated IQA has been argued to be a sustainable way of driving not only the quality agenda but also the transformation of HEIs locally and globally.

### **Recommendations**

In order to enculturate quality in HEIs, this study recommends the following:

1. Infusion of quality assurance in routine academic activities so that it is perceived as implicit in processes and operations rather than as an event located in directorates of quality assurance. The directorates of quality assurance can oversee and support capacity building in the divisions, departments, schools and sections and provide reports to regulatory agencies but the responsibility to assure quality should be a shared responsibility.
2. A consultative and participatory approach in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and continual improvement should be nurtured, supported and entrenched in HEIs. This inclusive approach embraces and empowers all players thus facilitating enculturation.
3. The habit of generating, organizing and analysing data as well as making use of data in decision making should be made the preferred way of doing things across all functions of HEIs. Documentation of processes, methods, decisions, communication and feedback should also be encouraged and supported. This goes a long way in created a culture of transparency, accountability and evidence-based decision making. This is critical for acculturation of quality assurance.
4. Efforts to enculturate quality assurance should be adequately resources. The initial investments made in capacity building and putting in place an efficient and effective quality management system may be enormous but once in place and enculturation attained, the



rewards, in terms of excellence, efficiency, productivity, enhanced institutional reputation, retention and satisfaction of staff are price-less.

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