General Conference Report

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Regional Workshop on Identifying Capacity Building Needs for the Improvement of Internal

(IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA) in Higher Education in Southern Africa (SADC)

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1. Introduction

The "Regional Workshop on Identifying Capacity Building Needs for the Improvement of Internal (IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA) in Higher Education in Southern Africa (SADC)" was co-organised by:

- The Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies (DIES), a programme of both the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK)
- The Council on Higher Education (CHE), South Africa
- The Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN)
- The Southern African Regional Universities' Association (SARUA)

About 90 participants attended the workshop, 20 of whom represented universities and the remainder a range of quality assurance statutory bodies and ministries. They came from 14 of the 15 countries that make up the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The main objectives of the workshop were to:

- Raise awareness and facilitate a better understanding of the benefits of regional cooperation on quality assurance (QA);
- Take stock of divergences and communalities between national systems within a regional cooperation framework (SADC);
- Analyse the existing internal QA structures at institutional level and external QA structures at national level against the background of regional standards as laid down in the draft African Standards and Guidelines (ASG);
- Develop a common understanding between university leadership, professors, quality assurance staff, assessors and ministries on the interrelation between internal and external quality assurance; and
- Identify current needs and challenges in terms of capacity development for different target groups and develop strategies to respond to these challenges.

This paper, based on the main discussions that took place during the conference, provides further reflection on the discussion of quality assurance at the institutional, national and international levels.

2. The importance of quality assurance

Several speakers emphasised the importance of quality assurance in the context of global, regional and national trends. On the international level, some trends have given quality assurance pride of place in higher education. Those include the rise of international rankings and the increased mobility of students and of cross-border provision (face-to-face and virtual). As a result, quality assurance has risen as a very important mechanism to frame interinstitutional competition and cooperation in higher education and to facilitate the movement of students and cross-border provision.

On the regional level, the significance of quality assurance was emphasised by N. Baijnath (CHE) in his introduction to the workshop. He observed that the region is becoming very important as a student destination because of the quality of some institutions and programmes, but there are a number of "stress institutions" requiring attention: "For both segments of the higher education system, quality assurance is hugely important".

The unevenness of quality was also emphasised by P. Langa who noted that the exponential increase in the number of students in Africa has not produced a mass higher education system. Most countries have not reached the 10% mark and there is a concentration of institutions in capital cities. G. Mohamedbhai echoed this concern by emphasising that instead of mass education, Africa has massified its institutions and that this is the critical element in the loss quality.[1]

The importance of quality assurance at both the international and the regional levels is matched by its growing centrality at the national level. That development has been driven by several factors including the broadening of participation in higher education, the emergence of new players such as private not-for-profit and for-profit institutions, the emergence of transnational education providers, the growing cost of higher education and research to the public purse, and, in some cases, the greater scope of institutional autonomy with its associated demand for greater accountability. Those trends have reinforced the need for the development of both internal and external quality assurance.

3. Key questions emerging from this workshop

Several issues were recurrent in this workshop and will be addressed in the rest of this report:

- What are the differences of approaches and degrees of maturity in quality assurance processes?
- How to address the differences that were identified, through harmonisation, convergence, standards, etc.?
- How to ensure that quality assurance does not stifle creativity, innovation and diversity?
- How to conceptualise the role of quality assurance at the institutional, national and regional levels?
- How to coordinate and promote synergy between the different QA initiatives, the bodies and groups that are working in quality assurance?
- How to foster top-down and bottom up initiatives?
- How to ensure the engagement of university leadership, academic staff and students?
- How to promote trust in the quality of higher education across borders?

4. Lessons learned from the pre- and post-ESG periods

Workshop participants discussed comprehensively how to address the differences in quality assurance in the SADC region. Interestingly, their discussions evoked the discussions in Europe just before the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance were adopted and implemented.

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[1] Cf. Mohamedbhai 2017

The nature of the discussion in the pre-ESG era is captured in the "Quality Convergence Study", published by the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in 2005. At that time, the national quality assurance agencies were discovering how different they were from one another. Such basic issues as the vocabulary used and the need for a glossary were voiced over and over again as quality assurance agencies were focused on their differences rather than their commonalities.

The objective of the ENQA study was to explore the potential for the convergence of national quality assurance systems in Europe through the examination of six national quality assurance systems. "In practical terms, the project aimed to find out *why* national quality assurance systems operate in particular, yet commonly identifiable ways in different national contexts." (ENQA 2005, p. 3) The starting point of the project was the descriptions of *how* these quality assurance processes work.

The study concluded that convergence can be achieved not only by identifying similarities but by understanding the different national contexts, which are at the root of different QA approaches. The study argued that convergence at the level of the QA process should not be the primary goal. Rather, it is the trust and acceptance of decisions made by QA agencies in other countries that matters and that trust in another agency is predicated on the confidence that its stakeholders demonstrate in the agency's process. The study recommended providing opportunities to understand better the national contexts and the different quality assurance approaches through a glossary, workshops and staff exchange between quality assurance agencies. Since then, ENQA has provided a forum for workshops and projects, which have been very useful in exchanging good practice, developing the professionalism of agency staff and trust within the European Higher Education Area.

This "Quality Convergence Study" was completed at about the time that the ESG were adopted. In presenting a framework for addressing diversity in the approaches and maturity of different quality assurance frameworks, the ESG shifted the conversation by providing a useful set of principles and a shared framework while accepting the diversity of national approaches. This is precisely what the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-AQ) propose to do (cf. R. Odongo's workshop presentation).

The ESG were adopted in 2005 during the Bologna ministerial meeting in London.[2] MAP-ESG, a 2011 European study examined the impact of the ESG six years later. Its main conclusion was that the ESG influenced higher education systems differently, according to the maturity of their quality assurance systems. Specifically, well-developed systems were strengthened by the framework provided by the ESG while, for developing systems, the ESG provided a supportive framework with useful reference points that contributed to shaping the further development of their quality assurance systems (E4 2011).

Trust in the quality assurance of another country is now predicated on a review of agencies and their acceptance as members of ENQA or their inclusion on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). Significantly, in an echo to the conclusion of the "Quality Convergence Study" and its stress on trust, the

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[2] For an explanation of how the 2015 version of the ESG was developed, cf. Crozier F., T. Loukkola and B. Michalk (2016).

reviews examine compliance with the ESG, including how well the agency works in partnership with its stakeholders and whether their methodologies are fit for purpose.

5. Five principles for going forward

Based on the workshop discussions and presentations and taking account of the lessons learned from the European experience, this report proposes five principles that could frame and structure the discussions about diversity and convergence of quality assurance practices in the SADC region.

5.1 A joint approach: Different functions at different levels

The first principle is to ensure that the three levels at which quality assurance is relevant – the institutional, the national and the regional – are understood in complementarity to one another. This is a very important principle that was expressed by P. Kotecha and E. Ngara during the workshop.

The institutional level refers to the internal quality assurance (IQA) processes of a higher education institution. If IQA is well done, it provides the most meaningful way to assure and enhance quality in higher education. While Butcher and associates have found varying levels of maturity in IQA processes in the SADC region (cf. N. Butcher's presentation and paper), it is hoped that Part A of the ASG-AQ will be effective in providing guidance to institutions that are developing their IQA (cf. Jumbe's presentation of an exhaustive IQA framework).

The national level consists in external quality assurance (EQA) approaches that are adapted to each national context and are meant to address specific national higher education needs and deficits. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the different national contexts produce different quality assurance approaches. The differences are expressed in many ways: in the legal status of the agency; whether it undertakes accreditation or evaluation of study programmes; if it is focused on the institutional level, whether it is conducting institutional evaluations, accreditations or quality audits; how it balances the control vs. the enhancement purposes of quality assurance; and how the approach changes overtime to adapt to new national needs and to changes in the international environment (cf. M. Martin's presentation).

Butcher and associates have found that all SADC countries have established some EQA mechanisms at the national level and noted that some countries have several QA agencies (e.g. professional accreditation agencies), requiring better national coordination (cf. N. Butcher's workshop presentation and paper).

The regional level should provide a framework of shared principles to balance the national diversity and celebrate its richness; this is the main goal of both the African and the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance. The regional level should also structure the coordination of the multiple actors that are working in the quality assurance field in order to optimise synergies and ensure cross-learning.

The example of East Africa, illustrated in M. Muruke's presentation of the East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN) and in M. Kuria's on the activities of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) should be useful to the SADC region. Some participants noted, however, that there are fewer differences in East Africa than in Southern Africa and, therefore, it is difficult to see how East African

cooperation can work as a model. M. Kuria responded cogently that focusing on differences is always possible, even in East Africa! In other words, it is best to prioritise regional cooperation by focusing on commonalities and accepting differences.

The regional level could also increase awareness of the different tools that have been developed and how they link up with national QA systems and the ASG-QA. As P. Kotecha noted, "The ASG-QA needs to be understood in conjunction with the SADC Qualifications Framework (SACD-QF) which provides a reference point for qualifications and standards development, as well as valuable work done to date on the development of an SADC regional qualifications framework, supported by regional guidelines relating to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT)." With respect to the SADC qualifications framework (SADC-QF), however, Butcher and associates have found that it has been well received but that priority should be given to its translation in all the SADC languages in order to promote it better.

5.2   Different actors, different processes, with good coordination and synergy

The second principle is focused on the different actors in the field of quality assurance. In her presentation, M. Martin presented a long list of beneficiaries and stakeholders in the figure below (to which one participant added the media).

Beneficiairies and stakeholders ?

Users	Uses
Government	To define higher education country-wide To assure quality higher education for citizenry To assure quality labour force To determine which institutions and programmes receive public funding To accept into civil service only those graduated from accredited institutions To generally use quality assurance as a means of consumer protection
Students	To assist in selecting an institution for study To ensure transfer between accredited institutions To ensure admission at the graduate level a different institution from undergraduate degree To assist in employment, particularly in civil service and in the professions
Employers	To assure qualified employees
Funding organizations	To determine eligible institutions for funding
Higher education institutions	To improve institutional information and data To enhance institutional planning To determine membership in certain organizations To facilitate transfer schemes To assure a qualified student body

Although each of those players have specific responsibilities, it might actually be useful to think about beneficiaries and stakeholders as partners as well. They should be partners during the development of external quality processes and during the phases where those processes are evaluated. That would help in promoting broad ownership of quality assurance and ensure that its enhancement purpose remains a focus. Nevertheless, those players are also stakeholders and beneficiaries; that implies that at least some of them have an accountability function which requires that the external quality assurance agency manages the tension between partnership (during the development of quality assurance) and independence (autonomy during the operational phase).

Similarly, there is a need to balance top-down and bottom-up initiatives to ensure broad ownership and appropriate implementation. That is the case at the institutional level where both the leadership and academic staff and students must be involved in developing internal quality assurance. That is the case at the national level where the higher education institutions, the students, employers, government representatives must work with the national quality agency. That is also the case at the regional level, where it is helpful that any regional QA framework is developed in partnership with the regional authorities, the institutions, the students, the employers and the quality assurance agencies, as both M. Hörig and G. Chazotte stressed.

There is also a need to ensure that IQA and EQA are properly linked (cf. B. Makunike's and M. Martin's presentations). This is supported in the ASG-QA, which link Parts A and B (providing standards for IQA and EQA, respectively) through Standard B1 (Objectives of EQA and consideration for IQA), which states that "EQA should ensure that the higher education institution has clearly articulated vision and mission statements, and it should help the HEI ensure the effectiveness of its internal quality assurance mechanisms, providing an additional instrument for assessing institutional quality." (ASG-QA, draft Sept 2017, p. 23) The guidelines of that standard emphasise the primary role of institutions for the quality of their provisions and the complementary nature of EQA in promoting an institutional quality culture.

At the development stage of EQA, it is important to think through IQA and EQA together, to ensure that EQA is not so invasive as to restrict the growth of IQA. As QA systems mature, there should be an understanding that EQA will evolve and be adjusted as IQA processes have gained in scope.

There is a temptation in countries where QA is still at an early stage to require that IQA be the mirror image of EQA. That should be resisted because it would lead to duplication of processes, with little added value to the institution. The second temptation, as was mentioned during the workshop, is to entrust the quality assurance agency with the task of supporting institutions in developing their IQA. That too should be resisted: it would result in the agency becoming judge and party when it comes time to undertake a review of the institutions that it has advised. Crucially, institutions must embed quality assurance processes in their governance and ensure that IQA supports their development goals and fits their specific

institutional profile and organisational culture.

5.3   *Fostering engagement*

Fostering engagement has already been allude to but is worth highlighting it as a principle because it is a key condition for the success of quality assurance.

Many workshop participants mentioned the resistance of top management and academic staff to IQA developments as the top two challenges for the development of IQA. Some in top management positions are focused on rankings and do not always see the need for IQA; as a result, governance processes do not include IQA and data availability is underdeveloped; therefore, IQA lacks objectivity. Academic staff, for their part, resist IQA and perceive it as burdensome, controlling and offering no benefits.

Those issues should be addressed as a matter of urgency because, without leadership and the academic staff support, IQA would hold limited benefits. An effective IQA involves the whole community: academic and administrative staff, students, alumni, external partners, etc. In addition, for those institutions that have not yet started developing their IQA, it is crucially important to think about how best to introduce them in order to maximise support and engagement. IQA processes that are conceived in a bureaucratic manner that will not engage academics. (cf. EUA 2011)

Similarly, as was stated earlier, an effective EQA involves discussion with institutions, students, employers, ministries during the phases of both development and the review of the agency. A partnership approach would address the main challenges to EQA which were identified by workshop participants, namely: ambiguous regulations, standards that stifle institutional diversity, lack of coordination across multiple QA bodies, operational independence and objectivity of EQA.

A key issue raised by the workshop discussion is how to develop knowledge and expertise in a developing system, for both IQA and EQA processes and the need to provide staff development for academic staff, students and agency personnel, albeit with different foci.

Firstly, staff development in higher education institutions must be seen as an essential component of quality assurance. It is ineffective to introduce IQA without offering academic development opportunities. In the absence of institutional support, academic staff are prone to reject IQA and see it as punitive and invasive. In Europe, academic staff development became a regular practice about five years after the institutions introduced their IQA process (EUA 2010, p. 20). It would have certainly been more effective had staff development and IQA been developed simultaneously.

Secondly, it is useful to think of students as partners of the quality assurance process and to prepare them for their role. They, too, will need training and development to be effective partners in IQA and EQA. There are good examples of student training in Europe but, obviously, it will be important for SADC to find its own way forward given the specific nature of student activism in the region.[3]

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[3] For a trail-blazing example, cf. Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (SPARQS): https://www.sparqs.ac.uk

Thirdly, staff development for quality assurance agency staff should focus on providing them with the technical expertise to carry out their responsibilities but, more importantly, it should emphasise the purposes of quality assurance and its limitations and help QA agency staff remain abreast of higher education trends both nationally and across borders. That kind of exposure will uphold the view that QA is not an end in itself but is meant to support and accompany higher education institutions as they grapple with multiple challenges and pressure points.

For both the institutions and the quality assurance agency, international cooperation raises quality levels and an international outlook is a key factor in ensuring quality though appropriate benchmarking, whether formal or informal. That is facilitated by attendance at international events and staff mobility, which should be conceived as part and parcel of staff development.

At the regional level, a key question at this juncture is to ensure the broad ownership of the ASG-AQ. Many good initiatives were presented during the conference and revealed the multiple players in that arena, notably the South African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA). In this context, workshop participants expressed the need to discuss a possible division of labour that would result in better coordination, synergy and effectiveness (cf. the conclusion of Gudrun Chazotte's presentation).[4]

5.4   Enhancing diversity, creativity, innovation and change

Many workshop participants spoke about the need to use standards, criteria, checklists and quantitative methods to regulate a higher education system which includes very weak providers. Others warned about the complexity of education and research activities and the risk represented by quality assurance to limit institutional diversity, innovation and change.

The challenge, for both EQA and IQA, is to address the needs for regulations and accountability and improvement and change and to balance those needs in a way that enhance the system rather than curtail its development. (EUA 2009)

The DIES Programme of the DAAD has developed very useful IQA training modules that are available on its web page and could provide further guidance.[5]

5.5   Check and change; check again and change again

The SADC region includes countries with mature EQA systems, such as that of South Africa. The presentation by K. Naidoo, from the Council on Higher Education (CHE), South Africa, was particularly informative in showing how a mature quality assurance body reflects on its own practices in the context

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[4] Some participants expressed the wish to develop a regional database of experts. This would be costly and difficult to maintain. It is much more effective to get names of experts from peer agencies, as the need arise. The QA agencies' databases are generally updated regularly and agency staff would have a better knowledge of their experts than anyone at a regional level.

[5] Please see at the bottom of the DIES-Project web page: https://www.daad.de/der-daad/unsere-aufgaben/entwicklungszusammenarbeit/foerderprogramme/hochschulen/infos/en/44515-dies-projects/

of a changing environment. The reflection includes reviewing the impact of its processes by assessing its benefits relative to the costs, and looking at all the activities that have been developed over time to analyse the inherent tensions and to integrate the different functions in order to "bring the different lenses together".

This type of internal review, which could also include an external element (for instance by bringing in international colleagues), is essential as QA systems mature and become more complex and bureaucratic. The tendency to multiply and add complexity to QA procedures is always present and it is incumbent on QA agencies to review their processes at regular intervals in order to explore how to simplify their approaches and to ensure that institutions are not overburdened or pulled in different directions. The same self-reflective approach also applies to IQA which is not immune to routinisation and bureaucratisation.

6. Key issues

In summary, the key issues that need to be addressed over time by IQA and EQA include:

− Identifying appropriate definition and measurements of quality (i.e., methodological issues, data availability and reliability);
− Promoting the independence and quality of peers (selection and training);
− Ensuring human and financial capacity for both IQA/EQA;
− Preventing bureaucratisation of IQA/EQA which can stifle innovation and creativity;
− Maintaining the autonomy of IQA from the QA agency (i.e. not be a mirror image of EQA processes; and EQA should not serve as a consultant to HEIs);
− Maintaining the autonomy of EQA from government;
− Fostering the view of IQA and EQA as an adaptive process, which requires self-reflection and internal and external reviews.

At regional level, trust is predicated on capacity building, international outlook, and full engagement of all partners and stakeholders in the QA processes. National differences will not be eradicated but they will be accepted if all those engaged in QA are carrying on in a useful and ethical way and supporting their judgement with good evidence. That, along with the ASG-AQ, will contribute to building trust across borders, provided the following conditions are met: adequate financial and human resources, data availability and reliability; an international outlook and autonomy of both QA agencies and higher education institutions.

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