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Building Internal Quality Assurance Units

Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance Systems within Lebanese Universities

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1 Introduction

Assuring the quality of the programmes and academic activities is primary the responsibility of the higher education institution. For this purpose, it is admitted that special measures, procedures and processes need to be defined and applied in each higher education institution. In this perspective, the need for internal quality assurance (IQA) is not questionable. Administratively, a Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) is at the core of the IQA.

The Quality Assurance Units must be responsible for facilitating the application of quality assurance (QA) measures in the Lebanese universities. These QAUs bureaus need to coordinate a number of QA processes to ensure that the educational programmes are conducted efficiently, and that the intended learning outcomes of the programmes are achieved by students. This includes implementing quality assessment of the academic process at the course, programme, department and university levels.

The findings of the assessment processes and procedures are mainly used to assure the quality of the academic activities but also serve to inform the decision-making at the different levels of the institution.

A major objective of QA is continuous improvement at all the levels. The QAU's activities must serve this objective. Dialogue and raising awareness can be very useful in this direction.

Several obstacles may hinder the internal quality assurance processes. For example, an IQA that induces high administrative overload is often registered. The QAU's must carefully consider these obstacles. Therefore, they need to automate the QA processes to be conducted electronically and used without excessive manual processing.

It is clear that the role of IQA is crucial for the development of a culture of quality and for continuous improvement. Obviously, IQA processes are sensitive and complex. Establishing and developing QAU's need to be performed with care.

The following pages provide a description of the proposed QA guidelines and process to be implemented at Lebanese universities by QAUs. The guidelines aim at supporting the Lebanese institutions in establishing and/or developing their QAU's. The Guidelines are inspired from the AUDIT Procedure run by the National Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA) since 2008 and revised and updated in 2016. The choice of the AUDIT as an inspiring model is first because its Criteria are based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality of Higher Education (ESG), whose revised version was approved in the Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Follow-up Group held in Yerevan in May 2015.

The Guidelines offers hints to the institutions to support them in the process to adopt an Internal Quality Assurance System, bearing in mind that the Lebanese universities do not start from scratch in terms of internal QA. The Guidelines' purpose is threefold: i/ to systematise a set of shared Principles to be used for internal QA purposes by the universities involved in the TLQAA+ Project and beyond, ii/ to promote an ESG-rooted set of Criteria in order to establish an academic community among the European and Lebanese partners institutions which could favour further cooperation projects and recognition of mobility arrangements, and iii/ to stress the need of the internal QA to be inclusive with specific roles to all stakeholders. It is worth noting that the targeted QA system needs to be sustainable and to support the development of quality culture that allows the institution to achieve its strategic goals in an optimal way.

2 The Purpose and Scope of the Guidelines

An implicit assumption at the start of the project was that the European Standards and Guidelines might provide, when adapted to the Lebanese context, some form of basis for the Guidelines to help support and develop QAUs. The previous experience of the TEMPUS TLQAA Project (2011-2014) has clearly demonstrated, amongst many things, that:

- A QA system must be based on principles and standards agreed with the key stakeholders – and include clear procedures and criteria
- The purposes and scope of the Guidelines must be 'matched' to the QA requirements and expectations placed on Lebanese universities
- The Guidelines must also be related to the various external QA procedures that Lebanese universities must, and/or opt, to fulfil
- The Guidelines thus cover the following issues:
    - ✓ the establishment of internal QA arrangements within a university concerning the roles and responsibilities of the institution as a whole
    - ✓ the maintenance of internal QA arrangements within a university concerning the roles and responsibilities of the institution as a whole
    - ✓ the monitoring and coordination of internal QA activities that are required as evidence for periodic external evaluation of the institution as a whole
    - ✓ the establishment of internal QA arrangements for the programmes an institution offers
    - ✓ the continued monitoring of internal QA arrangements for the programmes an institution offers
    - ✓ the analysis of internal QA outcomes to support improvement and enhancement
    - ✓ the monitoring (and co-ordination) of programme proposals submitted from an HEI for external evaluation/accreditation
- The Guidelines must be applicable within the different management models used by the diverse HE institutions in Lebanon. These can, for the purposes of QA, be largely grouped into:
    - ✓ arrangements under which the lead management group maintain control over all internal QA including practical implementation – often under the particular responsibility of one or more of the vice-presidents/rectors. Typically the vice-president academic might take responsibility for all QA relating to teaching and learning (and probably research), whilst a vice-president 'management/resources' might be responsible for governance-related matters. There are of course some areas of overlap, for example those aspects of human

resources including teaching and research staff, that will need to be clarified

- ✓ arrangements under which, whilst the lead management maintains responsibility for overall quality, the 'practicalities' are devolved to, for example, a faculty or even programme level; with a reporting system to ensure that senior management remains informed about current activities and outcomes

There may be no need for the Guidelines to be directly involved with matters relating to the development and establishment of an HEI and its required external accreditation or any other external-led procedure, other than to provide support for the way(s) in which the proposed university might set out its plans for subsequent internal QA. Further, the Guidelines do not need to replicate those already provided by the national body's requirements in support of universities seeking to apply for the Quality Assurance Certificate (e.g. AUDIT Programme from ANECA).

3 Definitions

An internal quality assurance system aims at establishing and systematically maintaining the quality cycle. This cycle includes: the definition of the policies, the process and the projects, their implementation, their evaluation, and their improvements as shown in the following figure.

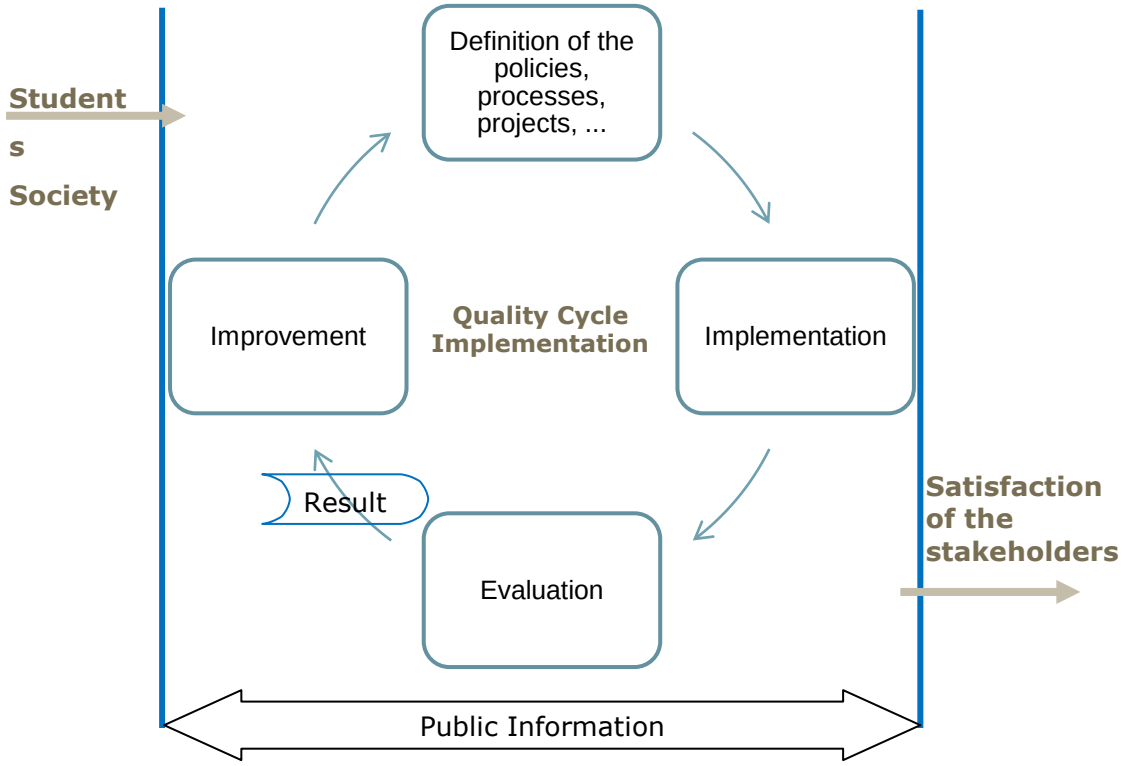

Figure 1. Quality Cycle (reproduced from ANECA documents)

It is also important to define precisely the stakeholders of the IQA process. ANECA has defined the following stakeholders and their relations to the IQA.

Stakeholders	Expectations to be considered in the IQA
Students	Selection and admission of students, programme characteristics, organisation and delivery of the content, learning support systems, outcomes, employment of the graduates…
University (management, faculty members, and	Academic staff, resources, academic progress, outcomes of the programmes and employment of the graduates, information system …

administrative and technical staff)	
Employers	Offered programmes, quality and relevance of the programmes, employment of the graduates…
Public authorities	Offered programmes, programmes profile, faculty members and support staff, academic progress, quality of the programme, employment of the graduates, …
Society at large	Offer and demand, academic results, employability…

4 Key Principles

In determining where the key principles lie it may first be worth considering the (very basic) purposes for which QA is being undertaken. For higher education in general these may be summarised as in the following:

- Is the institution offering the study programmes bona fide?
- Does the institution have the resources to offer its programmes?
- Are its programmes designed to meet the outcomes and standards that may be reasonably expected of the programme names/titles?
- Do students get a fair opportunity to complete their studies?
- Is student's work assessed fairly, consistently and rigorously?
- Do student's achievements match with general expectations associated with the degree / award title?
- Do the programmes and academic activities serve the development of human knowledge?
- Do the programmes and academic activities serve the society needs?

The general principles that underpin all aspects of quality assurance in higher education are that quality assurance should:

- be an integral part of the internal management of the institution, whether directed specifically at teaching, learning and research, or at the support and other functions the HE institution operates
- be relevant, valid and proportionate to its specific aims and the risks it seeks to cover, and be applied consistently
- reflect the interests of students, employers and society more generally
- recognise the central importance of institutional autonomy, and the HEI's primary responsibility for the quality of education its provides
- be aligned with the legal, pedagogical and social contexts in which the HEI operates
- include a focus on improvement / enhancement, in addition to monitoring whether necessary standards and expectations are being met
- lead to reports that are easily accessible and comprehensible to the general public

It is worth noting the importance of good articulation between internal and external quality assurance. They play complementary roles as put in evidence in the following table.

External Evaluation	Internal Quality Assurance
➢ Evaluate the level of conformity of the institution to the external criteria ➢ Performed by a specialised agency or experts ➢ Yield a decision: recognition, accreditation, etc.	➢ Identify the strengths as well as the improvements to implement ➢ Performed by an internal committee or team ➢ Yield no sanction ➢ Be based on a set of internal standards/criteria

5 Setting up an Internal Quality Assurance

The set of principles underpinning the document of Guidelines is largely based upon the experience of ANECA in developing the procedure on the evaluation of the Internal Quality Assurance Systems of the Spanish universities, called AUDIT since 2007. The procedure was designed from the perspective of the European standards and Guidelines and focused on the identified needs of the Spanish higher education institutions in designing their own internal quality assurance systems to comply with both the compulsory national programme accreditation procedure established by the law, but also with the requirements defined by the European Standards and Guidelines in the Bologna process approved in the bologna Follow-up Ministerial conference of Bergen in 2005. The procedure has been adapted to better fit with the needs of the Lebanese Higher Education institutions and the result is presented in the following.

The phases to consider when setting up an internal QA system are as follows:

- **Commitment:** The governing body formally commits itself to designing a system of Internal QA in a document that recognises the importance of quality assurance and its purpose of improving the institution and its programmes.
- **Forming a unit responsible for Internal Quality Assurance:** The governing body constitutes a unit responsible for the system of Internal QA (see below for the structure of this unit). The level of participation of the governance team in this unit is specified as well as the decision-making process. The governing body shall: i/ appoint a person to take in charge the system, ii/ decide on resources to be provided, iii/ designate the entities to involve and, iv/ specify the means of communication to be used for the involvement of internal stakeholders.

- **Diagnostic:** The structure responsible of the system of IQA analyses the situation of the institution and the needs of the stakeholders in relation with internal quality assurance. This analysis shall be performed in light of the mission and vision of the institution and its programmes. It shall also consider any recommendations or requirements for past or current accreditations (institutional or programmatic). This phase includes:
    - The identification of tools and supports for the diagnostic: strategic plan, regulations, structure, procedures and results of satisfaction surveys
    - The identification of the sources of information
    - The appointment of self-assessment officers and their contacts in the faculties, departments and units
    - The identification and prioritisation of the needs of the different stakeholders

  Other supporting elements may feed the diagnostic phase:
    - The rankings that allow benchmarking based on indicators at national, regional and international levels
    - The surveys of students, graduates and professors
    - The courses evaluations performed by the students which enlighten on the perception of the students as to the teaching and learning
    - The assessment of students outcomes and achievements
- **Action plan:** Based on the diagnostic performed, the responsible unit suggests an action plan submitted to approval. The action plan shall specify:
    - The quality objectives
    - The targeted stakeholders
    - The fields of application of the system of IQA
    - The operational processes of the system of IQA

Once the action plan fixed it shall be executed in the form of projects. The outcomes shall be evaluated regularly and this shall serve to feed the definition and update of the process.

6 Structure of the System for Internal Quality Assurance

The structure of the system for internal QA depends on the organisation, the culture, the history and the needs of each institution. Therefore, there is no fit-all model for such structure. Nevertheless, it is well admitted that such structure shall rely upon:

- A unit responsible of quality assurance (team, vice rector, service or bureau)
- A strategic committee (already existing or created specifically for the system of internal QA)
- Projects teams that vary according to the projects to be implemented

Looking to existing structures in different systems might inspire the definition of an appropriate structure. Therefore, in the following are reported two cases: one from Europe and the other from the United States.

6.1 Literature review

A survey[1] conducted by the ***European Universities Association*** covering 222 universities in the European higher education area shows the following structures used for the systems of IQA:

- Strategic structures
    - Rector or Vice Rector 64%
    - Institutional QA committee 53%
    - QA committee per faculty 40%
    - A delegate in charge of quality matters at the rectorship 36%
- Operational structures
    - A specialised central QA unit 54%
    - Staff in charge of quality and other matters 45%
    - Institution based QA unit 9%
- Support structures
    - Educational innovation and support unit 48%
    - Staff development unit 38%

[1] Zhang, 2010

Another study[2] on QA conducted at ten universities confirms the strategic place of a system for IQA, which would even be part of its success.

In ***American universities***, more classical structures are being used:

- Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness
  Responsible for the strategic planning of the institution and for the tools to support management improvement
- Office of Education Evaluation
  In charge of the evaluation of the teaching and learning and responsible for the pedagogical support
- Office of Institutional Research
  Responsible for data collection (surveys, indicators, evidences, …) that serve the decision making, the accreditation and the rankings

6.2 Suggested structure

It is suggested to have the structure of the IQA system including:

- A strategic committee
- An operational team
- Projects teams

The **Strategic Committee** ensures the following functions:

- Self assessment of the institution and programmes
- Prioritisation of the improvements to implement
- Designation of the persons in charge of each improvement
- Follow up on the projects
- Recognition of the people taking part in the projects
- Supporting the promotion of the quality culture

The strategic Committee shall be formed of 8 to 15 members: central management of the institution, responsible of the quality (Vice rector, delegate, …) members of the operational team, and other members capable of providing data in various fields

[2] Sursock, 2011

relative the quality and assessment (Governance, Research, Teaching and Learning, Internationalisation, Resources, Services to Society).

It is suggested to have the **Operational Team** part of the Strategic Committee. It links this Committee to the different projects' teams and partners. Specifically it ensures:

- Piloting self-assessment: preparation of procedures, tools, and implementation
- Support for documentation
- Accompaniment in the prioritization of improvements
- Monitoring the implementation of action plans
- Sharing of good practices
- Presentation of the results of self-evaluations and projects
- Recommendations for improving the quality process
- Pilot training on topics related to quality assurance
- Communication and awareness
- Links with national and international accreditation bodies and other external stakeholders concerned with quality
- Drafting of the institutional/programmatic report and the organization of the experts' visit in case of external evaluation
- Engagement in national or international initiatives related to quality assurance
- Presentation of the results of the institution and the proposal of new improvements

The operational team is made up of 3 to 7 people depending on the size of the institution. It is desirable that they enjoy professional legitimacy and know-how in steering change. It is useful for various expertises to be represented: academic, management, statistics, writing and documentation.

The **projects teams** aim to implement the improvements identified as priorities by the Strategic Committee. Their role is as follows:

- Project design
- Project execution

- Evaluation of results

The size of a project team depends on the project and the necessary human resources. It is dissolved at the end of the project.

The projects form a very useful tool for continuous improvement. Several examples of projects may be cited: experimenting new pedagogical methods, training of faculty members or staff, defining indicators and assessing internationalisation, defining indicators to assess the link between research and education, …

Although primarily concerned with internal quality assurance, the system for internal QA can also manage other platforms of transparency and comparability, such as[3]:

- Accreditation: certification given by a government or an agency
- Benchmarking: comparing the practice and the performance of the institution with similar institutions
- National, regional and international rankings
- Classification (typology of institutions)
- Information materials addressed to students, employers and the general public

7 Assessment and Tools

Several tools are cited in this document. This section aims at describing some tools that may be used in an IQA system. The list of tools is not exhaustive and it is not mandatory to use all of them. Moreover, it is not mandatory to use the same set of tools for all the programmes of an institution. The list provided in this section is only illustrative.

It is important to differentiate in an IQA process the difference between **assessment** and **evaluation**. Assessment is the process of objectively

[3] Hazelkorn, Loukkola, & Zhang, 2014

understanding the value or the condition of a thing by observation and/or measurement. Evaluation (sometimes called summative assessment in comparison to formative assessment) is the process of determining the value of a thing by comparison to a standard or by benchmarking with a similar thing. It is expected that the IQA system goes by an assessment of each programme or academic activity followed by an evaluation of this programme or academic activity.

It is also important to distinguish between **direct and indirect assessment**. Direct assessment is tangible and measurable. It tends to be more compelling evidence of the students learning. In comparison, indirect assessment often refers to proxy signs of what students have achieved in their learning process.

Assessment is performed at different levels in a Higher Education Institution:

- Assessing individual student learning
- Assessing courses
- Assessing programmes
- Assessing the institution

While **assessing student learning** is usually performed by the instructor, it is important to have an IQA that assures this is conducted in a proper way. For this purpose, samples of the syllabus and corresponding exams, quizzes and/or projects etc. can be examined. It is crucial to make sure that the learning outcomes defined for a course are connected to the teaching and learning methodology and to the assessment methods applied. It might also be important to check that appropriate support is provided to the instructors in order to have them capable of connecting the learning outcomes, to the appropriate teaching and learning methodology and assessment.

Similarly to the assessment of student learning, the **assessment of the courses** is primarily the responsibility of the department/faculty or academic unit in charge of the programme/courses. The IQA system needs to make sure that proper assessment is conducted based on relevant evidence. It is important to assess how well the learning outcomes are attained and to what extent the learning objectives of a programme are served. It is crucial to have the academic unit in charge of a

programme conducting a regular assessment and evaluation of the courses yielding an identification of the strengths and weaknesses and plans for improvements. The QAU may provide online tools to perform the direct assessment of the courses and/or to collect the students' feedback about the courses. QAUs may study the attainment of the learning outcomes and programme objectives based on:

- Courses results
- Students' feedback
- Minutes of the department/faculty meetings

Additional tools can be also used for example to verify that feedback on the students' feedback is provided etc.

To **assess programmes** several tools may be used:

- Curriculum mapping that shows how the courses learning outcomes fits with the programme learning objectives. The mapping is generally presented as a table with one entry being the courses learning outcomes and the other entry corresponds to the programme learning objectives
- Entrance and exit surveys
- Surveying alumni, faculty members and/or employers

In addition to the previous tools, performance indicators can be determined allowing an evidence-based evaluation.

There is no single set of tools that shall be used in all institutions. The QAUs must define the set of tools and indicators that fit well with their objectives and with the institutional context. However, exchange of good practices permit to further develop existing tools.

8 Conclusions

The present document sets different guidelines for establishing and implementing an internal quality assurance system. These guidelines cover the general principles that define a framework for an efficient IQA. They also suggest a structure for this system.