

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

Majda El Moufarej (1,*)

Received: 26. 2. 2025
Revised: 3. 4. 2025
Accepted: 4. 4. 2025

© 2025 University of Science and Technology, Aden, Yemen. This article can be distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

© 2025 جامعة العلوم والتكنولوجيا، المركز الرئيس عدن، اليمن. يمكن إعادة استخدام المادة المنشورة حسب رخصة مؤسسة المشاع الإبداعي شريطة الاستشهاد بالمؤلف والمجلة.

¹ Ecole Supérieure de Technologie – University of Abdelmalek Saadi, Morocco.

* Corresponding Author Address: m.elmoufarej@uae.ac.ma

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

Abstract:

The main purpose of this research paper is to propose a tentative model of how to proceed in the task of evaluating internal quality assurance (IQA) in Moroccan public universities. This initiative is intended to raise the academics' awareness about this issue and hopefully take advantage of some recommendations and implications, as suggested in this paper so as to implement IQA as required. With regard to the method of exploration, the study was carried out in the light of The Qualitative Approach (interviews with seven (7) participants: senior lecturers from diverse schools of the same university) as well as document analysis), since academic quality is so complex and cannot be properly quantified or measured. As concerns the results of this study, they show that the interviewees seem to converge about the importance of academic quality, though they have different specializations. However, their evaluation of the learning outcomes is not unified. The proposed model is specifically intended to fill this gap in public universities. The main implication from this investigation is that an adequate fulfilment of IQA of the teaching operation is mainly in the hands of the academic staff whose main responsibility is to undertake their activities regularly, as required. The proposed model constitutes a strong recommendation to be adopted in the process of IQA evaluation. Thus, the value of this study lies in its originality, as the proposed Model of IQA evaluation is the first initiative in the Moroccan educational context; it may inspire university teachers and raise their awareness of the crucial importance of IQA and how to implement it properly.

Keywords: *Quality, internal Quality Assurance, Standards, evaluation, academic staff, public universities.*

نحو نموذج لتقييم ضمان الجودة الداخلية في الجامعات العمومية المغربي

ماجدة المفرج⁽¹⁾

الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث الى اقتراح نموذج تقييم ضمان الجودة الداخلية (IQA) في الجامعات العمومية المغربية؛ كما يسعى الى رفع مستوى الوعي لذا هيئة التدريس حول أهمية تطبيق هذا النوع من التقييم وفق معايير الجودة التي وضعتها الوكالات الوطنية لتقييم وضمان الجودة في التعليم العالي؛ وتمت الدراسة على ضوء المنهج الكيفي (مقابلات مع نخبة من هيئة التدريس بالإضافة إلى تحليل الوثائق)، حيث أن الجودة الأكاديمية معقدة ولا يمكن قياسها أو تحديدها بشكل دقيق. فيما يتعلق بنتائج هذه الدراسة فقد تبين أن المشاركين في المقابلات متفقون بشأن أهمية الجودة الأكاديمية رغم اختلاف تخصصاتهم وبالتالي فإن تقييمهم لمخرجات التعلم لم يكن موحدًا. ويهدف النموذج المقترح الى ملء هذا الفراغ في الجامعات العمومية على الصعيد الوطني. بالنسبة للاستنتاجات لقد تبين أن إنجاز عملية التقييم مهمة صعبة، وخاصة بالنسبة لهيئة التدريس الذين يتحملون هذه المسؤولية حيث ينبغي القيام بأنشطتهم بانتظام. ويشكل النموذج المقترح توصية جوهرية يجب اعتمادها في عملية تقييم الجودة الأكاديمية. ويعتبر مقترح نموذج تقييم الجودة الداخلية في الجامعات العمومية مبادرة قيمة قد تساهم في تسليط الضوء على أهمية ضمان الجودة الداخلية وكيفية تطبيقها بشكل صحيح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجودة، ضمان الجودة الداخلية، معايير، تقييم، هيئة التدريس، الجامعات العمومية

(1) المدرسة العليا للتكنولوجيا - جامعة عبد المالك السعدي، المغرب.

* عنوان المراسلة: m.elmoufarej@uae.ac.ma

INTRODUCTION:

Quality Assurance (QA) has recently become a common practice, which is endorsed by Higher Education (HE) institutions worldwide, due to the pressure of internal and external forces. One of the aims of this quality movement is to make the contribution of university education to socio-economic development highly significant. This entails that graduates are currently required to have a high-quality profile, i.e., to be competent and master the 21st-century skills needed in the labor market. This wave of change, which is mostly imposed by globalization and digitalization, has received special attention from educational executives and has the effect that university education should provide good learning outcomes.

To ensure that the overall institutional performance is on the right track, a QA system should be endorsed to assume this task of checking regularly the extent to which the set of quality standards of evaluation are strictly respected, as expected. This operation of IQA has the advantage of proving the accountability of the institution, gaining the trust of the public, and enjoying international recognition. This is the case of Moroccan public universities, the object of the present study. These universities have witnessed criticism from some stakeholders, particularly employers, who claim that such institutions lack quality in the absence of a national QA system. This gap has recently been filled by the establishment of the National Agency for the Evaluation and Quality Assurance (NAEQA) in Higher Education (2019) to gain public confidence. It is intended to ensure academic quality on a national level in an objective way, based on a set of standards and guidelines.

The Quality Code proposed by the NAEQA can serve for evaluation at the institutional level (self-assessment); hence, it is referred to as Internal QA evaluation. The Quality Code can also be used by external agents of the NAEQA (External QA evaluation). However, individual institutions are responsible for establishing a unified model to systematically evaluate programs. This situation has led the researcher to design a tentative model for IQA evaluation partially based on the quality standards of this agency and other international contributions in this domain, such as Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015), the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2018), and Kawtharani, J. (2019).

Research problem

In the present study, I have chosen the thorny issue of academic quality and internal quality assurance in Moroccan public universities for several reasons. In the first place, the issue in question has recently witnessed a hot debate among different actors at the national level over the apparently increasing rate of graduates' unemployability, partially due to the claim related to the unsatisfactory educational outcomes reflected in the students' lack of appropriate skills that could enable them to be integrated in the workplace. Secondly, to my knowledge, Moroccan scholars in the domain of education have not exhaustively studied the issue of IQA in higher education; hence,

there is a void in the literature that needs to be filled. Additionally, the NAEQA has not established a specific model for IQA evaluation at the national level. To solve this problem, the researcher has been inspired by the relevant literature, such as Schindler, L. et al. (2015) and Kawtharani, J. (2019), to suggest a tentative model to illustrate how to evaluate the whole teaching operation in a systematic fashion.

Research significance

With the adoption of the recently established Quality Standards by the NAEQA, the present study aimed to highlight two issues: first, to raise the academic staff's awareness of the importance of IQA practices and their obligation to participate actively in its implementation for reasons of accountability and compliance with national and international quality standards. Such an initiative has the advantage of improving the faculty members' self-image, maintaining the institutions' good reputation, and regaining the confidence of different stakeholders. Second, to interpret the set of NAEQA Standards into action, specifically from the dimension of teaching. More importantly, the adoption of the proposed model in this paper may also have the advantage of inspiring academics, unifying their conception of program assessment, and hopefully creating harmony in public universities at the national level.

Research Hypotheses

- 1:** Not all academic staff are aware of 'quality assurance' and its role in ensuring accountability.
- 2:** IQA cannot be properly achieved unless there is a division of labor between the institution, university teachers, and students.
- 3:** The adoption of a unified model for IQA evaluation guarantees harmony in the Moroccan academic community. Additionally, the institutions' visibility is more likely to become well established once IQA activities are undertaken systematically with rigor and professionalism and strictly guided by a clear evaluation model of IQA implementation.

Research questions

RQ1—Has your university/faculty/department been engaged in quality assurance exercises (institutional self-evaluation) in recent years?

RQ2—How do you evaluate the quality of education in public universities in general and the effectiveness of the quality assurance practice in your faculty in particular?

RQ3: To your knowledge, what models, methods, and procedures have been adopted to ensure the quality of academic offerings in Moroccan public universities?

The practical section will address these questions after presenting the theoretical framework and research methodology.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

In this section, I will briefly present the theoretical framework for the study with special focus on some relevant works that have recently dealt with the complex concepts of 'quality' and 'quality assurance' in higher education at the international level.

1. Defining 'Quality'

As a first methodological step, it is worth pointing out three major challenges to defining "quality." The first challenge lies in the elusive nature of quality (Schindler et al. (2015, p. 4)), since it has different interpretations depending on the various perceptions of different stakeholders: administrative and academic staff, students, employers, the government, accrediting bodies, quality assurance agencies, etc. For example, most heads of institutions, as academic leaders, conceive quality in terms of teachers' performance excellence, satisfactory program learning outcomes, and purposeful scientific research. With regard to academics, they associate quality with the achievement of the teaching objectives as planned in the curriculum and the students' acquisition of the relevant knowledge and skills as embodied in the completed course and in conformity with academic standards (Cheng, 2011, p. 11). As for employers, they see quality as the mastery of the appropriate competencies and skills that enable graduates to perform their jobs in a professional way. The government, too, which finances public/state universities, expects graduates to have a high-quality profile to contribute effectively to the economic development of the country.

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

Other challenges that may come to mind when attempting to define quality concern the social, economic, and political environment where education takes place. Equally important, the regional context of higher education does affect one's conception of quality. This entails that quality is relative in its conceptualization and realization (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 10). Thus, it is more likely that educational quality in the US is viewed differently from that in France, the UK, or Morocco, for example, due to different cultural backgrounds. With this background in mind, let us examine how "quality" was conceived by some experts in quality assurance.

Harvey & Green (1993) attempted to define "quality" on the basis of five dimensions, namely, quality as excellence, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation. In what follows, I will briefly present the first and the fifth concepts because they are more relevant to the topic under consideration:

- '**Quality**' as "*excellence*": this conceptualization conveys the idea of attaining an exceptional level of education and distinctiveness, as in the case of some prestigious universities like Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard, in terms of the special student experience that these institutions provide. However, this concept is not useful when it comes to evaluating quality in higher education as a whole (Green, 1994, p. 13). This trend of thought is advocated by the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) (2015), where quality is viewed simply as reaching a threshold level or the minimum standards agreed upon to facilitate comparability of educational programs and encourage student mobility across the European countries that adhere to the framework of ESG. This is the strategy that is adopted in Moroccan public universities because of the great number of students, and education is free of charge.
- '**Quality**' as "*transformation*" entails a positive change in the whole institution, including a high productivity of the academic staff and a continuous enhancement of the learners expressed in different ways. This dimension of quality as transformation will also be placed under focus when considering QA in this paper because of the constant change, mainly due to the technological revolution, and new demands require relevant skills and competencies.

In this context, Harvey and Green (1993:8) state that:

Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant, be it a student learner or researcher. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.

This implies that the program learning outcomes have to focus on the most relevant skills and competencies currently required to boost students' professional development so as to be highly qualified to satisfy different stakeholders and especially employers.

2. Defining 'Quality Assurance'

Having shed some light on some aspects of educational quality, let us next move on to examine the concept of 'Quality Assurance,' define it, specify its types, and present the possible approaches adopted in its operationalization.

Higher education institutions are currently more concerned with quality assurance to safeguard the quality of their educational programs (the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2018)) because of many factors, especially the wave of global economic change due to technological developments and the need for 21st-century skills to ensure the employability of graduates. Universities are required to change their strategic planning and adapt their curricula to meet the demands of the labor market. There is also the pressure of external forces such as international organizations like UNESCO and quality assurance agencies (such as QAA of the UK) that keep controlling educational quality worldwide and diffuse reports of their evaluation. Such pressure

constitutes a threat to universities, which strive to maintain a good reputation and avoid public criticism.

Accordingly, HE institutions embrace QA as an obligation to establish confidence and trust for the government, which finances public universities and employers who seek highly skilled people in the workplace. This implies that QA has become the norm that regulates the overall performance of HE institutions while keeping in mind the expectations of all potential stakeholders. Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993).

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

METHOD:

1. Research Design: The Qualitative Approach

We collected data using a qualitative approach. This approach was the most revealing and appropriate in dealing with the complex nature of academic quality, as illustrated in the following paragraphs.

A number of authors writing on research methodology have proposed a set of characteristics in relation to qualitative research, such as Bryman (2012) and Creswell (2014). These characteristics are outlined in Creswell (2014:185), and one of them may be briefly stated as follows:

Qualitative researchers have to select a natural setting, in which they tend to collect data, and where participants experience the issue under study. In this research paper, which revolves around the central issue of internal quality assurance in Moroccan higher education, the natural site that has been chosen is a specific public university. This setting is the most appropriate context where professors, deans, presidents, and students are all concerned with teaching quality and performance excellence.

2. Qualitative Study of Interviews and Documents

An attempt was made to illustrate how the qualitative method contributes to effectively highlighting the issue of IQA in Moroccan public universities, based on two basic tools of investigation, namely, interviews and document analysis. This exploratory investigation used Moulay Ismail University (MIU) in Meknes as a convenient example.

To begin with, some clarifications are needed with respect to some key concepts that guide this qualitative study, in particular: the approach to the topic, sampling, interviewing, and document analysis. We briefly illustrate these elements below.

The topic of IQA in MIU falls within the scope of social sciences, as it deals with educational quality, an issue that concerns various components of society: students, parents, employers, QA officers, education authorities, etc. Given that this kind of subject can be properly evaluated only by "the educated community," random sampling cannot be an appropriate choice to get the right information about academic quality in higher education. Thus, it is nonprobability sampling that comes into play when expecting accurate and satisfying responses about academic quality.

At this point, it is worthy of notice that the sampling strategy used in the selection of respondents has features of three major types of sampling used in qualitative research, namely, convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. The first category of samples, i.e., convenience sampling, "relies on available subjects—those who are close at hand or easily accessible" (Berg & Lune, *ibid.*, pp. 50-51), as all the participants were selected from different institutions in MIU. Such a convenience sampling was useful for two reasons: first, the accessibility of selected respondents; second, the study was exploratory in nature.

The sample of interviewees that has been carefully chosen in this qualitative study also has the characteristics of purposive sampling, based on some salient characteristics of the target population, which is the academic staff, and also the purpose of this research project, which revolves around teaching quality in public universities and how it is ensured. The deliberate choice of specific informants was due to some reasons, such as expertise in the domain, teaching experience, diversity of specializations, and reliability in giving insightful information about the issue under consideration.

The third non-probability sampling strategy in the selection of informants has the characteristics of "snowball samples," because the process consists of locating subjects with certain attributes, as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, and which are necessary in the exploration of this study. As noted by Berg & Lune, "Snowball samples are particularly popular among researchers interested in studying ...sensitive topics, or difficult-to-reach populations" (p. 52). This is true in the case of the present research because the topic under examination is complex, sensitive, and requires respondents who are qualified in the area of higher education in general and QA systems in particular. The current 3D sampling strategy considers all these factors, focusing more on interview quality than quantity.

3. Some notes on interviews and document analysis

Interviews

As indicated previously, qualitative data collection was based on interviews and document analysis, two basic instruments of the *qualitative method*. Let us briefly illustrate the characteristics of each of these tools separately.

§ E-interviews:

With regard to the first instrument, it was conducted online by emails (henceforth *E-Interviews*), not face-to-face with participants. This traditional method, though it has some benefits because it is synchronic and provides additional nonverbal cues to understand the respondents' reaction, is often demanding in terms of time and availability, among other constraints. On the contrary, *e-interviews*, which are an instance of recent methodological innovations in qualitative research, along with telephone and Skype interviews, among other online/digital tools, prove to be very practical nowadays when conducting qualitative studies.

In effect, the usefulness of this type of interviewing lies in the fact that it solves the problem of time and distance for participants, some of whom are unwilling to accept the traditional face-to-face interview for different reasons. The choice of e-interviews, which are asynchronous, has the advantage of encouraging subjects to think carefully about *double-barreled* questions (which require a simultaneous response to two issues in a single question) and *complex questions* that cannot be easily grasped in full by the informants unless they are rethought and given more time.

To this end, some major focused open-ended questions have been prepared and intended to be answered in depth only by a selected group of teaching staff and through *e-interviewing* (Meho, 2006). More importantly, some of the questions addressed in the *e-interview* necessitate detailed information that cannot be drawn from questionnaires. Under this conception, I believe that the information obtained from the in-depth interviews provides more insights about the issues of academic quality and IQA in the institutions where they work.

Next, we will quickly introduce the second tool of 'document analysis' that supported the results of the interviews and helped lay the groundwork for a possible IQA Model in Moroccan higher education, which we will discuss after describing and analyzing the data.

Document Analysis

According to Patrick Love (2013), "When conducting qualitative research in a collegiate environment with the goal of understanding something about student, faculty, academic, or administrative life, failure to include 'document analysis' may indeed be leaving a gap in the ability." (p:99-112). This statement emphasizes the crucial importance of integrating documents in qualitative research so as to provide a solid foundation for the analysis. Reference can be made to the primary documents "where the author of the document is recounting first-hand experience with the

phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 1998). The author describes documents as “a ready-made source of data” that is easily accessible” (p. 112). This is true in the case of official documents available, especially on websites in the form of reports or presentations displayed on web pages to be known by the public.

The study of QA in higher education necessitates gathering any authentic information from recognized sources to give it more value and reliability. This observation is supported by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2010), stating that “QA in higher education usually depends heavily on different types of documents, ranging from policy papers, standards, and criteria, as well as guidelines, which are sometimes referred to as transparency tools” (cited in Waheed, 2013). Using some available data from the NAEQA and ministerial reports is very useful for the purpose of cross-validation with data obtained from the interviews. Accordingly, the use of document analysis is strongly advocated in qualitative studies because it can safely “ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated” (Merriam, p. 126). Yet, one limitation of the documents to be analyzed was that “they are not developed for research purposes and therefore the information they offer may not be in a useful form” (p. 124). The researcher must reconstruct the text and extract the key information. Thus, having introduced the main elements to be used in this qualitative study, the discussion began with interviews, followed by document analysis.

4. The Practical Part:

Data description and analysis of e-interviews:

We conducted e-interviews with seven (7) university teachers. The **researcher believes that this group of informants is the most concerned with academic quality, so the choice was limited to them.** Moreover, since the present investigation had an exploratory aspect, the e-interview was exclusively based on the academic staff. The participants display different characteristics that relate to age, gender, teaching experience, and diversity of specializations. The following diagram clearly illustrates this:

Table 1: Distribution of interviewees per age, gender, specialization and teaching experience

ID	Age	Gender	Specialization	Teaching experience
Prof.1	65	Male	English	>35 yrs
Prof.2	60	Male	English	>30 yrs
Prof.3	50	Female	English	>25 yrs
Prof.4	45	Female	English	>15 yrs
Prof..5	40	Male	French	>10 yrs
Prof.6	40	Female	Economics	>10 yrs
Prof.7	45	Male	Computer Sciences	>15 yrs

We did not directly identify the institutions where informants work for the sake of anonymity. We addressed the seven (7) participants with interviews consisting of nine (9) questions. We sent them the questions via email at the same time we received their consent. The questions revolve around various challenging issues of great importance to the theme of the present study, which questionnaires cannot exhaustively address. For convenience, we repeat the three major research questions we outlined earlier:

RQ1: Has your university, faculty, or department participated in quality assurance exercises, also known as institutional self-evaluation, in recent years?

RQ2: How do you evaluate the quality of education in public universities in general and the effectiveness of the quality assurance practice in your faculty in particular?

RQ3: To your knowledge, what models, methods, and procedures have been adopted to ensure the quality of academic offerings in Moroccan public universities? These questions were described and analyzed simultaneously in this order:

Description and analysis of RQ 1:

RQ1: Has your university, faculty, or department participated in quality assurance exercises, also known as institutional self-evaluation, in recent years?

Most interviewees seemed to have no clear idea about this kind of information except Respondent 1:

- *Respondent 1:*

I am aware of this information. Institutional self-evaluation may have been carried out at the level of university, but I am certain that teachers were not involved, at least the teachers I know! Again, it's possible that an outside body or agency conducted the quality audit, but the teachers were unaware of it.

The other respondents provided roughly the same answer by stating that institutional self-evaluation takes place in an informal way during the meetings held by the faculty council.

This question represents the core of the research problem of the present study. We expected more information about the potential quality assurance practices implemented in public universities. Respondent 1 stated that, to his knowledge,

His faculty does not appear to be actively involved in quality assurance exercises. Yet, institutional self-evaluation may have been carried out at the level of the university, while most teachers were not involved, which is ironic, since they are the first to be concerned in this issue. Their absence could be due to the fact that they are not officially required to attend meetings about QA.

The same respondent, who *was more aware of different kinds of institutional evaluation from his discourse, said, "Quality evaluation could have been done by an external committee from the Ministry of Higher Education, but teachers had no idea about it."*

This implies that there may be no clear vertical communication between heads of institutions and the academic staff regarding internal quality assurance and the measures to be taken for its regular implementation. Interestingly, the other 6 respondents followed the same line of reasoning regarding institutional self-assessment, though their feedback was very brief. *Given that no complete version of QA evaluation has been available, it can be inferred that public universities do not ignore quality assurance; it is dealt with based on National Pedagogical Norms.*

Description and analysis of RQ 2:

RQ2: How do you evaluate the quality of education in public universities in general and the effectiveness of the quality assurance practice in your faculty in particular?

Different interpretations of this question arise due to its complex structure. Only Respondent 1 gave a substantial answer

- *Respondent 1:*

Any evaluation like this requires the setting up and implementation of specific procedures, with the involvement of all stakeholders (teaching staff, administrative staff, and students), which, to my knowledge, has never taken place, systematically, in our institution. I prefer not to make any unfounded or unscientific value judgments in this regard, as I have never received an invitation to participate in such a process.

The other respondents contented themselves with short and conflicting answers:

- *Respondent 2 answered, 'Not excellent.'*

- *Respondent 3: Scientific committees*

- *Respondent 4: Periodic faculty council with heads of departments*

- *Respondent 5: Je pense qu'il n'y a pas une évaluation systématique pour assurer la qualité dans notre faculté; il y a la qualité sur "papier seulement"!*

"I think there is no systematic evaluation of quality assurance practices in our faculty; there is quality on paper only!"

- *Respondent 6: 'Bon, en général' "Good, in general."*

- *Respondent 7: La qualité académique respecte les normes établies par l'établissement.*

"Academic quality respects the norms established by the institution."

This question's phrasing appears ambiguous due to its multiple interpretations. But such divergence in reasoning was constructive. Respondent 1, for example, started by giving some valuable information about a sound evaluation of academic quality. According to him, for this evaluation to be accountable, it requires setting up specific procedures and involving three parties: the administrative staff, teachers, and students. But this operation has never taken place. Given that the respondent has never taken part in this process, he preferred *not to make any unfounded/unscientific value judgments in this respect.*

The other respondents proposed different answers: Respondent 2 was not satisfied with the quality of education in public universities and his institution. *However, he did not provide an explanation for his dissatisfaction, suggesting that the quality of education, while not excellent, could still be good.* The problem of giving short answers may not help the researcher reach a profound understanding of the issue, as suggested by Respondent 1 in his fairly explicit statement. Respondents 3 and 4 thought that they were asked about how evaluation takes place in public universities. They cited scientific committees and periodic faculty councils with heads of departments, respectively. According to them, this is the procedure followed in the task of quality evaluation. Nevertheless, their feedback was relevant to the extent that they were aware of some strategies adopted in public universities to manage academic quality. Respondent 5 denied the existence of any systematic procedure for quality evaluation, and according to him, there is no quality in reality; there is quality on paper only! This respondent provided negative feedback and seemed to converge with Respondent 1, who expressed the same attitude toward the procedure of quality evaluation in public universities.

Respondents 6 and 7 redressed the balance with their counter-argument, as they were satisfied with the quality of education in their institutions (of economics and computer sciences). This paradoxical situation needs an explanation. A closer look at the specialization of the 7 informants might provide some clues about this dilemma.

Description and analysis of RQ 3:

RQ3: What models, methods, and procedures have Moroccan public universities adopted to ensure the quality of their academic offerings?

Most respondents found this question challenging, as they didn't seem to understand it properly, with the exception of Respondent 1. The latter provided a satisfying answer to this issue when he stated with more confidence that:

*I am aware that Moroccan higher education has implemented measures to improve its teaching and assessment practices. But the top-down approach **has made it impossible for qualified people to contribute to the process, which led to failure in most cases and disappointment for those who care about the future of the Moroccan university.***

This respondent proposed joint collaboration between educational executives and expert faculty members in all the steps taken for the proper management of higher education. The top-down approach creates resistance on the part of academic staff since they are not involved in the design of evaluation procedures, among other matters.

Respondent 2 answered the question with one word: *Exams*, while all the other respondents mentioned "continuous assessments" and "exams" as standard procedures to ensure academic quality in public universities at the national level.

As can be seen from these divergent responses, there is no unified method of ensuring academic offerings, and some interviewees appeared to be dissatisfied with the current situation, as could be inferred from their short feedback. This problem has been overcome by the recent establishment of an official guide of *quality standards* by the NAEQA (2019) in coordination with university teachers to work out a unified and objective model to ensure academic quality in public universities at the national level. Against this backdrop, we have attempted to propose a tentative model of IQA evaluation.

a. Document analysis:

The documents mentioned in this study include the main source for the evaluation and quality assurance guide in higher education, which is available in its original Arabic version from 2016 and the updated version published in the official Bulletin in 2019, along with PowerPoint presentations and notes from educational leaders, and web pages about the latest quality standards from the NAEQA. Other secondary sources that were very useful include the ESG (2015), the UK Quality Code (2018), and other seminal works published by international experts in QA, as outlined in the theoretical framework. Such documents have been examined in depth and taken much advantage of in the analysis and interpretation of the interviewees' responses as well as in the design of the proposed model of IQA evaluation in public universities.

b. The proposed model of IQA evaluation in Moroccan public universities:

The proposed model of the IQA system is tentative, but it constitutes a form of a 'strong' recommendation that could be more inspiring to institutions, the academic staff, the NAEQA, and researchers in the domain of quality assurance. The abundant literature on QA systems worldwide primarily inspires this model. (See in particular ESGs, 2015; the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2018: www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsandQuality/What-is-quality).

It is clear that a good evaluation of IQA in HEIs must align with certain common standards of academic quality to provide trustworthy information that can be accepted by national EQA and international QA agencies and organizations. Specifically, IQA requires the application of a systematic procedure in the process of assessment. Martin & Stella (2007:37) clearly articulate this idea:

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

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

The Annual Assessment:

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

- 1) A program specification document, which is required for all programs and is a major component of the program file. The program specification will show how the program design and details meet the quality assurance standards in higher education, as officially suggested by the NAEQA along with the Ministry of Higher Education.
- 2) A course description of the subject with a clear and detailed study plan prepared by the teacher;
- 3) Students' course evaluation (survey);
- 4) The teacher's course evaluation, based on students' assessment;
- 5) A course file provided by the teacher, which includes all the activities covered in the classroom during a given semester;
- 6) I am the Head of Program Evaluation.

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

Periodic Review of Academic Programs:

This periodic review takes place within the institution. It aims to examine and evaluate the program's academic provision, the quality of the teaching-learning process, the experience of the students, the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and any relevant challenges and priorities that need to be settled. The ultimate goal is to make sure that the academic programs of public universities match with predefined standards. Interestingly, public universities are required to implement a regular self-assessment strategy to maintain objectivity and transparency. The periodic review adheres to four standards that pertain to the academic program, students, faculty members, facilities, and learning resources.

The Periodic Review of Academic Programs takes these standards as a means of evaluation, making a distinction between the different variables that contribute to IQA. The operation involves a self-study activity performed by faculty members, students, and directors/coordinators of the program. With the assistance of an evaluation committee, the chair of IQA in particular carefully examines such activities and ends up with a general evaluation of all programs. The chair also submits a detailed evaluation report on all academic programs to the head of the institution (Dean/Vice Dean/Director). The overall IQA evaluation will ultimately be subject to external QA assessment. Next, we will focus on other related recommendations, implementations, and limitations of the study.

5. Recommendations, implications, and limitations of the study:

Recommendations

There are three main recommendations that are worth suggesting:

Firstly, there is a need to set up an independent office or unit that is exclusively responsible for the regular management of IQA at the institutional level, as required by the NAEQA (see *Quality Standards*, 2019). The *head of the institution and his vice deans will select a committee to run the unit*. The committee consists of members from the academic staff that represent different departments, in addition to a few members from the administration who know about quality assurance. A senior professor, highly qualified in teaching quality and QA management, should chair the committee.

Secondly, the key to success for the implementation of IQA involves the need to establish an independent *unit* in charge of transmitting information of different types and the availability of the internet to assure a strong communication network in the institution, where all the academic staff are always in direct contact with the administration and the office of IQA.

Some implications

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

- First, quality in public universities is difficult to define and measure; quite related to this point is the difficulty in delimiting the scope of QA. The evaluation of QA heavily relies on the chosen definition of "quality". Besides, different stakeholders have different objectives to attain.
- The second implication is that without the support of heads of university institutions for the academic staff, IQA in teaching and learning is unlikely to be undertaken properly. This implies that the deans/directors of their schools should give faculty members due appreciation.
- The third implication involves the academic staff, who have to participate actively and regularly in the fulfillment of IQA evaluations regarding their programs.

Limitations of the study

The present research was exploratory, and the results were not expected to be conclusive; hence, they could not be generalized to other public universities. Moreover, two other limitations are worth pointing out: human and physical: the target population that was selected for e-interviews was limited to seven participants and to one public university only. Therefore, there is an urgent need for coordination of the academic staff from all Moroccan universities to devise a unified model of IQA evaluation to be officially adopted by public universities and institutes regardless of their differences in programs and missions.

6. Conclusion:

Before setting up a tentative model of how to undertake IQA properly, it was shown that it is difficult to define "quality," which is relative. Additionally, it was pointed out that the scope of QA evaluation depends on the adopted meaning of "quality" as well as the nature of the institutions and their missions. Equally important is the responsibility of the academic staff to participate actively in the implementation of IQA. Thus, the ultimate goal of this paper has been to highlight the importance of setting up a model of IQA evaluation in public universities so as to ensure accountability. To achieve this, we have tried to suggest a basic model of QA for the institution, as it is required for improving programs, assessing academic performance, and for outside evaluations by the NAEQA and international QA agencies and organizations.

References

- Bakkour, E. (2016). L'Agence Nationale d'Evaluation et d'Assurance Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique du Maroc (Une nouvelle expérience). Retrieved from <https://www.cmimarseille.org/sites/default/files/newsite/library/files/en/el-.pdf>
- Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cheng, M. (2011). *Quality in higher education: Developing a virtue of professional practice*. Sense Publishers.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Département de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique. (2006). Assurance qualité dans la réforme de l'enseignement supérieur au Maroc. Rapport présenté à l'occasion de la Conférence sur la Qualité et l'Évaluation de l'Enseignement Supérieur, Sèvres, France, 18–21.
- EL Moufarej, M. (2022). *The academics' perception of internal quality assurance in Moroccan public universities: The experience of Moulay Ismail University* (Doctoral dissertation). Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fes.
- Green, D. (1994). *What is quality in higher education?* Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), 9–34.
- Harvey, L., & Newton, J. (2004). Transforming quality evaluation. *Quality in Higher Education*, 10(2), 149–165.
- Kawtharani, J. (2019, March 25). The office of institutional effectiveness and quality assurance. Retrieved from <https://www.dohainstitute.edu.qa>
- Martin, M., & Stella, A. (2007). *External quality assurance in higher education: Making choices*. UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Meho, L. I. (2006). E-mail interviewing in qualitative research: A methodological discussion. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57(10), 1284–1295. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20416>

- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- NAEQA. (2014–2016). *The National Agency for the Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education / الوكالة الوطنية لتقييم وضمان جودة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي*. Rabat, Morocco. Retrieved from <http://www.aneaq.ma>
- NAEQA. (2019). *Quality standards: A national referential guide to the evaluation and quality assurance in higher education / الدليل المرجعي لتقييم وضمان الجودة في التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي*. Rabat, Morocco.
- NAEQA. (2020). *Quality standards: A national referential guide to the evaluation and quality assurance in higher education and scientific research / الدليل المرجعي لتقييم وضمان جودة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي*. Official Bulletin, January 16, 2020. Retrieved from <http://www.aneaq.ma>
- Patrick, L. (2013). Document analysis. In *Research in the college context* (pp. 99–112). Taylor & Francis.
- Schindler, L., Puls-Elvidge, S., Welzant, H., & Crawford, L. (2015). Definitions of quality in higher education: A synthesis of the literature. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 5(3), 3–13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v5i3.244>
- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.
- UK Quality Code for Higher Education. (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.ukscqa.org.uk>
- UNESCO. (2017). *Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments* (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2nd ed.). Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002593/259338e.pdf>
- Wilger, A. (1997). *Quality assurance in higher education: A literature review*. National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University. Retrieved from https://web.stanford.edu/group/ncpi/documents/pdfs/6-03b_qualityassurance.pdf