

# A proposed framework for best practice in Quality Assurance in Namibian Higher education institutions

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## Abstract

This study investigated into the current status of quality assurance in the relatively young higher education sector of Namibia, where the official quality assurance system still is in the process of development. The purpose of the study was to determine the status and level of quality assurance mechanisms within Namibian higher education institutions with reference to current international quality assurance practices.

The study confined itself to degree-granting higher education institutions only, with a university status. Three institutions participated in the study - one public university, one private university, and one polytechnic. A phenomenological explorative and descriptive design was used with the aim of seeking an understanding and interpretation of the true meaning that the participants accorded to their experience of the phenomenon under study, namely, quality assurance in higher education institutions. The methodology was based on improvement-oriented evaluation. The data were collected by means of individual interviews (purposeful sampling) and institutional document analyses. Focus group

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interviews were conducted for the purposes of triangulation. This threefold approach was adopted so as to allow the triangulation that would ensure effective data collection and information validation.

The investigation resulted in a proposed framework to inform quality assurance development in Namibian universities. The study highlights the relatively underdeveloped state of quality assurance mechanisms within Namibian universities and provides useful pointers for the assurance of quality in Namibian higher education.

## **Background**

Higher education makes a significant contribution to economic competitiveness and welfare in a global knowledge-based economy (Wahab, 2010). According to Wahab (2010), the higher education sector has always been conscious of academic excellence and high standards. In recent years, however, quality higher education has become an increasingly important phenomenon that attracts the attention of various stakeholders. There are many reasons for this, such as mass higher education, globalisation, internationalisation of higher education, increasing competition, growing pressure for accountability by accreditation and funding bodies and, most importantly, the need to transform teaching and learning practices (Jonathan, 2000).

The above factors are some of the principal developments that have triggered the need to introduce systematic quality assurance systems and processes in higher education the world over. In order to measure the effectiveness of the higher education sector, quality assurance and assessment have become an integral part of higher education throughout the world. Today, quality assurance is no longer an option but rather a requirement if higher education institutions wish to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability, and subsequently enhance their global comparability and competitiveness. Provision of quality higher education has become an essential element for the survival of higher education institutions in the highly competitive higher education world. In response to this challenge, most higher education institutions worldwide have now put formal and deliberate mechanisms for quality assurance in place (Wahab, 2010).

In Namibia, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has recently introduced a System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Namibia. The implementation of this system started in 2009, making it compulsory for every higher education institution in Namibia (both public and private) to implement systematic internal quality assurance systems and processes supported by quality assurance policies to ensure the provision of quality higher education that would significantly contribute to the realisation of *Vision 2030* (NCHE, 2009).

This study was subsequently conducted to identify the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in higher education institutions in Namibia, and to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the implementation of these propositions. Based on the findings of the study, a framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian higher education institutions was developed in an attempt to improve the current practice of quality assurance in higher education institutions in Namibia. This framework is intended to bring structure to the systems to which it is applied, as well as to assist higher education institutions to organise their quality assurance systems and processes in a systematic manner. It does not attempt to prescribe the nature of the quality assurance systems,

processes and mechanisms for higher education institutions, but rather to gear them in particular directions in accordance with international best practices.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Nowadays, there is so much attention paid to the phenomenon of quality that the notion may arise that quality is an invention of the last decades. Indeed, according to the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), it is possible to have the impression that higher education had no notion of quality before 1985, although this is, in fact, not true (IUCEA, 2008). Attention to quality is not new and, on the contrary, it has always been part of the academic tradition with concern about the quality of higher education being as old as the higher education institutions themselves. The IUCEA argues that it is the outside world that is now emphasising the need for explicit attention to quality. However, as far back as the Middle Ages in Europe, scholars would travel long distances in search of “good” higher education institutions (Strydom *et al.*, 1997). In the early days higher education institutions and academic staff did, indeed, pay attention to quality, but often in an unstructured way (IUCEA, 2008). According to IUCEA (2008), during these early days, higher education institutions acquired their reputations based on the quality of their teaching, in the same way as modern, “world-class” higher education institutions, such as Harvard and Oxford, are today sought after because of their reputation for the quality higher education and scholarship they offer. During these early days, quality assurance in higher education functioned in ways that were related to the strong traditions of *academic freedom* and *institutional autonomy* in higher education (Strydom, Lategan, & Muller, 1997). According to this, Strydom *et al.* (1997), certain higher education institutions used mechanisms such as external examiners at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, while other institutions tended to opt for this practice at postgraduate level only, while others had no established practice of using external examiners at all. In those days, it was the élite only who participated in higher education and, in addition, there were only a few students who were able to make it through the education system to this level (*cf.* Brennan & Shah, 2000). These traditional practices meant that there were minimal challenges to the quality of higher education provision as compared to the many challenges facing higher education today (Lagrada, 2002).

According to Shin and Harman (2009) and Jacobs in Strydom *et al.* (1997), the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of considerable development in many aspects of human endeavour, with higher education playing a central role in these developments. According to the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO), many governments as well as other interest groups the world over started to realise that a large group of highly educated people is essential for the prosperity of society (*cf.* UNESCO, 2007). As a result, governments of many countries commit a large percentage of public funds to the development of higher education in order to provide the quality higher education that will ensure the development of nations. Policies on access to education, including higher education, have also been formulated to eliminate the legal and economic barriers that were preventing the lower socio-economic classes from participating in higher education (Shin & Harman, 2009). This role of quality higher education in the development of nations has also been acknowledged by international organisations such as the Association of African Universities (AAU), the World Bank, and UNESCO. Indeed, on its website, the AAU (2008) suggests that quality higher education has been found to be important factor in national development. In addition, the World Bank has also been cited by the AAU (2008) as acknowledging higher education as a critical element of

development on which the developing countries must focus if they are to make progress in a world that feeds on knowledge and breeds on competition. Similarly, Neetens (2007) notes that higher education is essential to developing countries, if they are to prosper in a world economy in which knowledge has become a vital area of advantage. The World Bank (2002), Materu (2007), and Bouton and Lucas (2008) all maintain that higher education is a critical pillar for social, political and economic development. In addition, it is a vital source of new knowledge and innovative thinking, it contributes to innovation, it attracts international talent and business involvement to a region, and it is an agent of social justice and mobility, as well as contributing to social and cultural vitality.

Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) argue that “expanding higher education may promote faster technological catch-up to improve a country’s ability to maximise its economic output and national development”. It is against the above background that the demand for higher education has increased significantly amongst those members of the society who have, traditionally, not participated in higher education on a large scale. Since 1980s, profound changes have characterised the higher education system with the expansion of higher education from the élite to the masses to universal systems; the reduction in financial support from governments; the growth of alternative systems of education and training such as private higher education; the need to respond to globalisation; and the knowledge society and information technology being at the heart of these changes (Reddy in Strydom *et al.*, 1997). Student enrolment has been increasing rapidly as a result of the removal of the legal and economic barriers that had promoted élite higher education, thus, now promoting mass education or, in other words, “education for all” (*cf.* Shin & Harman, 2009).

According to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), this massification of higher education has placed tremendous pressure on higher education institutions to open their doors to increasing numbers of students as the demand for access to higher education has soared (COL, 2009). Growing numbers of private higher education institutions have also emerged to help expand access to higher education (*cf.* Shin & Harman, 2009) and governments are, thus, no longer the sole providers of higher education (UNESCO, 2002). Quality higher education, however, has become an issue of concern for different interest groups (*cf.* Shin & Harman, 2009). According to these authors, mass and universal higher education has meant that higher education institutions are now struggling with contradictory goals. On the one hand, there are strong pressures to expand access but, on the other hand, there is an urgent need to overcome shortfalls such as “low quality” (Becket & Brookes, 2005). It is obvious that the increased demand for higher education together with the relatively scarce resources have serious implications for the quality of the higher education provided with finances, staffing and infrastructure coming under tremendous pressure in the provision of higher education (Jacobs in Strydom *et al.*, 1997).

Global movements in higher education reform have brought quality assurance in higher education institutions into the spotlight (Kistan, 1999). Increasing demand has meant that higher education has had to improvise in many ways in order to be able to provide the required standard of higher education. Nevertheless, the quality of the higher education provided has been severely questioned in recent years by various stakeholders in the sector, including both higher education experts and employers (Bloom *et al.*, 2006). The issue of quality assurance has, thus, become the focus of higher education institutions worldwide (Becket & Brookes, 2005), with the topic of quality in the provision of higher education, as well as the way in which this quality is both evaluated and enhanced, growing

in importance and becoming one of the first policy priorities and key issues on the agendas of the on-going discussions on higher education worldwide (Shin & Harman, 2009).

In Namibia, as in many countries throughout the world, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of quality higher education in national development. In its policy framework, entitled *Vision 2030*, the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN, 2004) acknowledges that higher education in Namibia plays a critical role in capacity building, professional training and socio-economic development in contributing to the realisation of *Vision 2030*, namely, to enable Namibia to attain standards of economic development which are comparable to those in the developed world. In 2004, Namibia adopted *Vision 2030*, a document that clearly spells out the country's development programmes and strategies aimed at achieving its national objectives. *Vision 2030* focuses on the following themes in realising the country's long-term vision:

- Inequality and social welfare
- Human and resources development and institutional capacity building
- Macro-economic issues
- Population, health and development
- Namibia's natural resources sector
- Knowledge, information and technology
- Factors pertaining to the external environment (GRN, 2004).

In the *Vision 2030* document, the former President and Founding Father of the Namibian nation, Dr Sam Nujoma, states that "the goal of the Vision is to improve the quality of life of the people of Namibia to the level of their counterparts in the developed world by 2030" (GRN, 2004). According to Dr Nujoma, "all these aspirations translate to people who enjoy high standards of living, a good quality of life and have access to quality education, health and other vital services" (GRN, 2004). Furthermore, the document states that the country will operate a totally integrated, unified, flexible and high quality education and training system that prepares Namibian learners to take advantage of a rapidly changing global environment, including developments in science and technology. The proposed capacity building will transform Namibia into a knowledge-based society in which changes in production and information technology will revolutionise all aspects of the manufacturing process and, thus, enable the country to become an industrial nation that may be ranked high among the developed countries of the world. The document identifies the following aspects as driving forces in terms of realising the objectives of *Vision 2030*:

- Education, science and technology
- Health and development
- Sustainable agriculture
- Peace and social justice
- Gender equality (GRN, 2004).

It emerges from the literature review that education, including higher education, is among the key driving forces for the realisation of *Vision 2030* (GRN, 2004). Against this background, one may assume that it is essential that the higher education institutions in Namibia provide high quality education to their students.

The pressures described in the above discussion illustrate the need for higher education institutions to pursue active involvement in quality assurance practices, in order to belie their image of exclusive "ivory towers" (Vroeijenstijn in Fresen, 2005). Traditional

evaluation methods, such as the external moderation of examinations, are no longer sufficient to guarantee the quality of university programmes (Fresen, 2005). In addition, institutionalised quality assurance has become an unavoidable phenomenon and many higher education institutions throughout the world are now preoccupied with quality, quality assurance and evaluation (cf. Kasasa in Strydom & Van der Westhuizen, 2002). It may, thus, be argued that higher education institutions in Namibia must also develop internal quality assurance mechanisms, operating in all institutional areas at different levels, to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability, and, hence, to enable them to become internationally competitive.

As background to the study an extensive literature review was conducted to investigate the phenomenon of quality assurance. This literature review revealed that, apart from unpublished official documents, there is little information available on empirical literature on quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. Accordingly, the researcher identified the need to investigate the field of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia in an attempt to close the existing knowledge gap.

### **Objectives**

In an unpublished document, the Namibian National Council for Higher Education (NCHE, 2007) also alleges that higher education institutions in Namibia have been offering programmes without the benefit of internationally benchmarked quality standards. This, in turn, has created a quality vacuum in which certain institutions of higher education offer programmes of which the quality may be contested, while others offer programmes of which the quality is benchmarked against reputable regional and international quality assurance and management systems.

As has been identified in the literature review, quality assurance is a priority in higher education worldwide and it is, thus, essential that institutions develop internal mechanisms both to ensure offerings, services and activities of reputable quality, and to be better empowered to meet the challenges involved in the development of a knowledge-based economy (Friend-Pereira, Lutz & Heerens, 2002; Materu, 2007).

The purpose of the study was twofold, namely:

- To map out and identify current internal quality assurance mechanisms in place in Namibian higher education institutions, and to investigate the development of institutional quality assurance systems/mechanisms in Namibian higher education institutions against the international best practices as identified in the literature
- To make recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education institutions in Namibia. These recommendations are contained in a framework of best practices in the quality assurance of higher education institutions.

Nevertheless, as has been pointed out in the background to this study, the study both recognises and acknowledges that there is no “blueprint” for quality assurance systems, and that HEIs are both unique and operate under a variety of circumstances. The framework devised is, therefore, both generic and non-prescriptive to avoid cloning higher education institutions and to allow them the opportunity to assess the suitability of the framework as regards their particular situations and then to customise it to provide the “best fit” within

the context of individual institutions in meeting their individual needs and requirements. In addition, the framework took into account and incorporated international best practices in quality assurance in higher education. It is hoped that such a framework may improve the quality of higher education higher education institutions in Namibia, and enhance their international competitiveness.

## **Methods**

A qualitative research approach was selected as being appropriate for this study because such an approach allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study in the natural setting. The research design was tailored to the purposes of this study and comprised a qualitative research approach. A phenomenological explorative and descriptive design was used with the aim of seeking an understanding and interpretation of the true meaning that the participants accorded to their experience of the phenomenon under study, namely, quality assurance in higher education institutions. In other words, this design provided the researcher with an opportunity to understand the phenomena as they unfolded in their natural setting during the enquiry. The methodology was based on improvement-oriented evaluation.

The study confined itself to degree-granting higher education institutions with a university status only. Three of these degree-granting institutions participated in this study, that is, a public university, a private university and a polytechnic.

The phenomenon and new knowledge that emanated from the literature and institutional documentation study were verified by means of individual interviews and focus group discussions, exploring the experiences of and the perceptions of the study population of the phenomenon. Participants in interviews were key officials in the selected institutions, including top management; directors/managers of various departments, deans, head of academic departments, ordinary staff members, and student representatives. The researchers used the institutional document analysis as a triangulation mechanism to serve as recorded evidence to verify and validate the data collected via interviews. Written communications of various types, which might include, but not be limited to, official records, letters, minutes of meetings, diaries, and reports, as well as the published institutional documents such as policies, procedures, guidelines, and operational manuals (*cf.* Hoepfl, 1997). The focus group discussion was employed to act as a further triangulation process. This three-fold approach was adopted to allow triangulation that would ensure proper data collection and information validation. Staff from the selected institutions who are assigned the responsibility to oversee the quality assurance systems of these institutions, that is, quality assurance managers and coordinators or equivalent persons, were purposefully asked to be part of the focus group panel.

## **Results**

A closer examination of the various quality assurance mechanisms in place at the three participating higher education institutions in Namibia showed that most of the existing mechanisms for quality assurance are not in line with modern day expectations of higher education. It was possible to deduce from the interview responses that institutions still rely on traditional methods in their approaches to quality assurance with lecturer evaluation by students and external moderation of examination systems as the only forms of quality assurance practices. There appeared to be little use of mechanisms such as benchmarking, graduate surveys, stakeholder satisfaction surveys and self-evaluation as tools for learning from the best continuous quality improvement.

Formalised quality assurance is still in its infancy stage as most of the participating institutions were still in the initial stage of implementing formalised quality assurance systems while some are still only considering implementing such systems. Formal quality assurance systems based on systematic self-evaluation, operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a cyclical basis, were not observed to be an integral part of the current quality assurance practices observed at these institutions. In addition, there is very little agreement on what quality and quality assurance in higher education entail and it would appear that the traditional notion of equating quality to high standards is still dominant in most higher education institutions in Namibia. This does not, however, imply that these traditional and existing mechanisms for quality assurance are to be discarded and, in fact, many of the time-tested procedures would still be useful, particularly if aligned with modern-day expectations of higher education, which entail formalised and systematic mechanisms for quality assurance.

The majority of higher education institutions do not have in place clear plans for quality assurance based on self-evaluation in terms of which the purpose, strategic focus area, criteria, information and resources required, responsibilities, timetables and expectations are clearly detailed. It is not possible to ordain quality in teaching, research and services as it has, rather, to be cultivated through consciously planned and on-going efforts involving assurance, assessment and audit.

While one should be mindful of the striving for academic freedom and administrative flexibility on the part of the faculty members and students in higher education institutions, it is also important to ensure that the public and private funding of higher education is judiciously utilised for results in line with the missions, visions, values and objectives of the institutions. It is, thus, essential that systematic quality assurance processes and mechanisms be drawn up and deployed in a serious manner.

Despite the fact that there have been attempts made by some of the institutions both to enhance quality and to institutionalise quality assurance, it is accurate to say that the impact of these efforts will not be felt for a few years to come as these deliberations are still in their initial stage of development and experience has shown that quality assurance is a process and it takes time before its impact is observed.

The study reaffirmed that a framework for best practices in higher education institutions in Namibia which aims at improving the current practice was necessary. It is on this premise that such a framework, highlighting best practice in quality assurance, was developed and recommended. It is hoped that this framework will bring about the envisaged improvement in the current quality assurance practice in Namibian higher education system.



The next section proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian higher education institutions as an outcome of this study. The proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in higher education institutions in Namibia makes a contribution to the field of study in that a product was created which can be used in higher education in Namibia and other higher education systems. It, therefore, also makes a meaningful contribution to the establishment and improvement of quality assurance systems in higher education in other countries, especially in Africa where quality assurance in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon. It is furthermore, believed that this paper will provide useful information for higher education institutions else where in the world that are further down the quality assurance road.

### **The framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian higher education institutions as the final outcome of the study**

As mentioned in the introductory section, to guarantee quality higher education, higher education institutions in Namibia need to implement systematic quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that they continuously improve the quality of their operations in their pursuit of excellence.

### **Perspectives on quality in higher education**

Quality is a relative, multidimensional and context-bound concept, and can be defined in many different ways. For instance, it can be viewed as excellence, fitness for purpose, value for money, customer satisfaction, zero defects, and transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Instead of creating a universal and explicit definition of quality for higher education institutions, this framework found it more relevant to examine quality as a relative and contextual concept. As the (IUCEA, 2008) put it, quality is always bound to satisfying customer. As no definition of quality is best for every situation, defining quality ultimately remains a common task for higher education institutions and their key customers and stakeholders.

### **Perspectives on quality assurance in higher education**

Quality assurance in higher education, just like quality, can be defined in different ways. For example, Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea *et al.* (2007) define *quality assurance* as an all-embracing term referring to an on-going, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of higher education systems, institutions or programmes. This framework provides a definition of quality assurance based on the understanding of a quality cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation and review), which is in turn founded on self-evaluation operating cyclically in all institutional areas at different levels. Thus, quality assurance should be seen as an instrument for the continuous improvement of higher education, based on a quality cycle establishing the appropriate interaction between planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review of operations.

### **The purpose of quality assurance systems**

This paper identified *continuous quality improvement* and *accountability* as the major purposes of most internal quality assurance systems in many institutions in many countries worldwide (cf. Lučin, 2005). According to Strydom (2001), the purpose of quality assurance at the institutional level might be to:

- Improve higher education institutions and their programmes.
- Provide assurance to the public regarding the achievement of the required general level of quality.
- Provide assurance to the public and other stakeholders that a particular set of professional and academic standards has been achieved.
- Demonstrate effectiveness and provide accountability regarding whether or not institutional and programme intentions have been fulfilled to a satisfactory level.
- Determine or effect efficiency in all functions of the institution at all levels.
- Permit choices (programmes) to be made in the institutions in respect of funding from the government.
- Enable rational decisions to be made in institutions and the higher education system.

These purposes are not mutually exclusive and more than one can be used in a given set of circumstances; however, choices are necessary to serve a specific phase of the development of the quality assurance system and implementation (*cf.* Strydom, 2001). According to Strydom (2001), the purpose of the quality assurance will influence the characteristics of a quality assurance system. Quality assurance is about the procedures, processes and actions intended to support the selected purposes through evaluating, monitoring and enhancing quality.

### **Principles of good practice in quality assurance**

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) has identified a set of common underpinning principles of good practice (IHEQA, 2005) that might be appropriate for Namibian higher education institutions. They are the following:

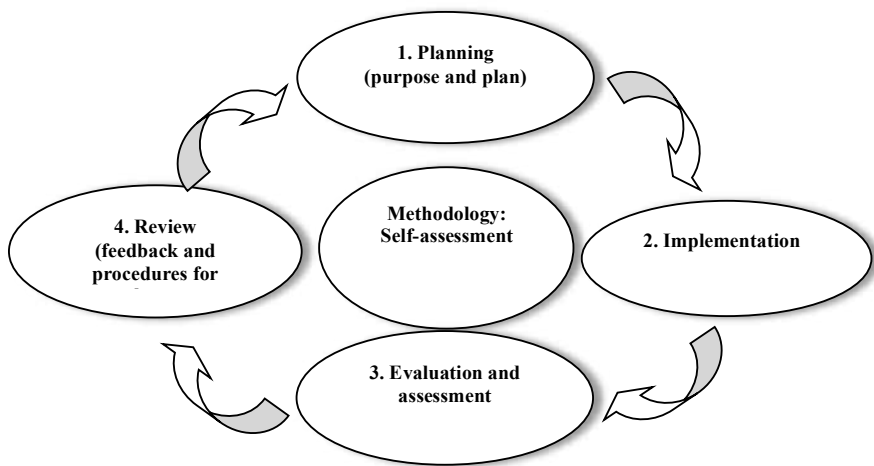
- The goal of quality assurance is *quality improvement*, including the enhancement of the student experience, and quality assurance procedures should reflect this.
- The ownership and main responsibility of the quality assurance process resides with the higher education institution - this is an essential condition for promoting internal quality cultures within higher education and training institutions.
- All higher education institutions are responsible for the establishment of quality assurance procedures that are clear and transparent to all their stakeholders, including staff, students, external stakeholders and the general public, in order to provide for the continuing evaluation of all academic and service departments and their activities.
- Quality assurance procedures conform to international best practice and include *self-evaluation*, followed by *external review* by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons.
- Students, staff and other stakeholders must be involved in the quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance procedures include appropriate measures to protect the integrity of the overall quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance procedures ensure *public accountability* and *transparency* through the publication of the outcomes of the evaluations.
- The quality assurance process facilitates *continuous improvement* through the implementation of findings of evaluations of higher education institutions.
- Quality assurance procedures and their effectiveness are *reviewed on a cyclical basis* by independent experts and the outcomes of such reviews are published.

These principles may be helpful in setting the direction for Namibian higher education institutions wanting to excel in quality assurance.

### **Main phases of the quality assurance framework**

This proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in higher education institutions has been strongly influenced by the Deming Quality Cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review) of continuous improvement (Brennan & Shah, 2000). The framework guides higher education institutions in paying attention to aspects that are important in terms of quality, but does not provide any answers to how institutions should operate.

The framework can be applied as a quality assurance framework for any higher education institution. In this regard, the involvement of stakeholders is of the utmost importance when aiming to improve the quality of systems and operations. The phases of quality assurance used in the framework are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: The quality assurance framework**

Source: Adapted from Finnish National Board of Education (2008)

The elements of the framework are planning, implementing, evaluation and assessment and review (feedback and procedures for change), each of which is assigned a set of quality criteria. Different institutions may make different choices for dealing with quality assurance and improvement (Woodhouse, 2003), which is why the framework presents the core quality criteria such that they can be applied to different operating environments as follows (Finnish National Board of Education, 2008):

- **Planning** refers to setting clear, appropriate and measurable goals and objectives in terms of policies, procedures, tasks and resources. In addition, the phase involves defining indicators to facilitate the monitoring of the achievement of these goals and objectives.
- The essential aspect of **implementation** is to establish procedures for ensuring the achievement of goals and objectives. At an institutional level procedures may vary considerably, such as in terms of the development of the operational system and the organisational structure, resource collection, involvement of stakeholders, or development of partnership.

- **Evaluation and assessment** cover the evaluation of higher education provision and the assessment of the achievement of outcomes at both the system and individual levels. In general, the evaluation and assessment phase consists of two parts, i.e. the collection and processing of data and discussions, the evaluation mechanism and defining its scope, as well as providing information on the results of the evaluation.
- **Review (feedback and procedures for change)** forms part of a systematic and goal-oriented process used to change plans and develop operations in order to achieve the targeted outcomes and to set new objectives. The aim is to learn from information acquired in different ways, such as by discussing and analysing the results together with the key stakeholders. It is also possible to learn from good practices by using them to benchmark the user's own operations.

The **methodology** may differ. Quality assurance emphasises self-evaluation combined with external evaluation. Self-assessment is regarded as the main process in quality assurance, through which higher education institutions evaluate their performance on the basis of evidence and subsequently produce self-assessment reports. The purpose of self-assessment is to lead to the improvement of the entire higher education institution and its higher education offering.

### **Criteria and standards**

The institutional development of this framework was drawn from information gathered from certain international examples. Therefore, it is in line with other international best practice frameworks for quality assurance. This framework therefore has the potential for rendering Namibian higher education institutions internationally comparable.

The quest for quality is not an easy one, especially since there is no absolute quality or objective quality. Nevertheless, higher education institutions are expected to assure their quality, to demonstrate their quality and to assess their quality. Having acknowledged the importance of quality assurance, the important questions are: How does one assess quality? What are the criteria for measuring quality? What are the standards against which quality is assessed? Hence, if one looks at what is said about quality, it becomes obvious that it is impossible to identify or formulate one set of general criteria or standards that can be applied across all institutions owing to the unique nature and varying purposes of higher education institutions. Consequently, the criteria will differ from institution to institution, discipline to discipline, and stakeholder to stakeholder, and different higher education institutions will have their own criteria and standards derived from their own objectives and/or demands (*cf.* IUCEA, 2008).

This framework does not provide an absolute yardstick for measuring the quality of education. It rather provides general guidelines for assisting higher education institutions to adapt specific criteria that will suit their unique nature and needs (*cf.* COL, 2009).

### **Self-assessment as a mechanism for discovering and measuring quality**

If a shared concept of quality, and the criteria and standards for measuring quality, is agreed on, one can ask: What is the best way to discover quality? An important tool in the field of quality assurance is critical self-assessment. Internationally, systematic quality assurance mechanisms for higher education institutions are based on self-assessment operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclical basis (*cf.* Griesel, Strydom

& Van der Westhuizen, 2002). Accordingly, self-assessment may serve as a preparation for external audit by external experts and, subsequently, the self-assessment report provides the external experts with basic information. It can also be used for self-reflection to ensure continuous improvement. Whether the purpose of self-assessment is for preparing the institution for audit or just for self-reflection, the bottom line is that self-assessment has specific value for the institution as it provides an opportunity for discovering quality.

Letuka (2000) identifies the specific goals of self-assessment as follows:

- To improve the institutions (purpose and goals), content, policies, procedures, services, organisational and intellectual environment and performance of the programme or institution under study.
- To foster commitment by enacting the recommended improvements through participation in the study process.
- To enhance the capacity of the programme or institution in question for continued self-assessment.
- To yield the basis for informed decision making (planning) about the future of the programme or institution under study.
- To yield written materials that can be used as the basis for external peer review or audit by quality assurance agencies or professional bodies.

According to the European University Association (EUA), the goal of self-evaluation is to enhance the institutional capacity for quality improvement and change through self-reflection. When discovering quality through self-assessment the following four key questions are important (EUA, 2010):

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does it know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

These four questions are not simply a structure for writing the self-assessment report, which is an essential part of the evaluation, but also constitute guidelines for the coherent re-organisation and restructuring of the institution, for analysing its strengths and weaknesses, its opportunities and threats and, last but not least, for determining the institutional capacity for change (EUA, 2004).

### **Principles of effective self-assessment**

In organising an effective self-assessment, one has to take into account some basic principles (IUCEA, 2008):

- The self-assessment process in quality reviews engages a wide-range of stakeholders, including students.
- A self-assessment aims at improving and enhancing the quality.
- A broad basis should be created for self-assessment in order to sensitise staff and students. The entire institution has to prepare itself for it.
- Looking at quality is more than merely testing performance. It also means organisational development and shaping the institution. For real self-assessment to take place, everybody has to be responsible and involved.
- It is important that the management of the institution support the self-assessment.

- Carrying out a critical self-assessment demands good organisation; there has to be someone in charge of coordinating the self-assessment process.
- Primarily, a self-assessment should never be felt as threatening. It should not be used to assess an individual, should never be used for punishment or reward and should never be used to blame someone.

### **The organisation of the self-assessment**

The institution determines how the self-assessment is carried out. However, it is good to make use of experiences gained elsewhere. On the basis of experience with other higher education institutions some suggestions may be made that can facilitate the process (INQAAHE, 2009):

- Self-assessment should never be the work of one single person.
- A panel to be responsible for self-assessment should be constituted.
- This group should consist of some three to five people, chaired by a coordinator.
- Students should be involved in the self-assessment.
- A clear timetable should be set up.
- The topics that have to be considered in the self-assessment should be distributed among the panel members and each member made responsible for collecting information, and for analysing and evaluating the data obtained from the self-assessment.
- The draft results should be discussed on the largest scale possible. It is not necessary to have consensus concerning the report; however, it is necessary for as many people as possible to be aware of its content.

### **Methodologies for self-assessment**

The strategies and methodology for the self-assessment may vary from one institution or programme or country to another. Jennings (2007) identifies several possible generic approaches, as follows:

- **Survey approach:** A questionnaire is administered to staff across the institution.
- **Guided self-assessment:** Involves structured workshops during which data are collected on the current state of the institution.
- **Assessment team approach:** Where a small team of staff, specially selected and trained as assessors, collects data and prepares a detailed report on the institution.
- **Structured learning self-assessment:** Calls for the active involvement of senior management and the collection of objective data on the current state of the institution.

### **The self-assessment report**

The self-assessment must be finalised with a self-assessment report. There are several conditions to be set for the self-assessment report (IUCEA, 2008; EUA, 2010):

- Since the goal of self-assessment is to promote on-going quality improvement and strategic development, the report should be honest and self-reflective.
- Being honest, self-analytic and self-critical is the best way to get the best from the self-assessment.
- Self-assessment reports
  - are analytical and reflective
  - identify strengths, areas for improvements, opportunities and constraints

- are concise and to the point.
- Strengths and weaknesses need to be stated explicitly; specifically, it is best to avoid playing down or hiding weaknesses, as this may not help an institution to improve.
- The self-evaluation report should culminate into a quality improvement plan. A quality improvement plan (also called self improvement plan) is a plan of action developed by the institution specifying activities, designated responsibilities and time frames in order to address the requirements and recommendations of the self-assessment report(s) in order for the institution to close the quality loop.

### **Standards and criteria for self-assessment**

In self-assessment, the important question is against what standards can quality be assessed? An institution has to formulate its own standards and criteria, but in order to be on par with stakeholder expectations and to ensure international comparability, it is essential to take into account the standards and criteria formulated by outsiders such as other institutions (for benchmarking), professional bodies, national and international quality assurance agencies. Self-evaluation may focus on an institution as a whole, or may select a specific focus. The aspects for the self-assessment may include, but not are restricted to the following (cf. IUCEA, 2008; ENQA, 2009; HEQC, 2004; NCHE, 2009; INQAAHE, 2009):

| Quality aspects to be assessed                     | Criteria   | Looking for evidence  |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b>Mission, vision, aims and objectives</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a clearly formulated mission statement.</li> <li>• The mission statement is publicly known.</li> <li>• The mission statement is in line with the academic and social context.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear vision for its role in society.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the institution’s vision for the academic training it provides?</li> <li>• What is the institution’s vision for its research activities?</li> <li>• What is the institution’s vision for its role in society?</li> <li>• Is the vision and mission known to the institution’s community and do staff and students share the vision and mission?</li> <li>• Has the vision been translated into a clearly formulated mission statement?</li> <li>• Has the mission statement been translated into achievable and operationalised aims and objectives?</li> <li>• What is the specific profile of this institution compared with other institutions in the country and beyond?</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Governance and management</b></p>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The governance structure of the institution is clear and adequate.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear management structure in which the decision-making processes, competencies and responsibilities have been clearly defined.</li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of management structure does the institution have in place: centralised and top down or decentralised and bottom up?</li> <li>• Have the role and functions of the central management, faculty management and staff been clearly described?</li> <li>• Does the academic staff participate in the decision-making process in teaching, research and community engagement?</li> <li>• Do students participate in the decision-making process in relation to their education?</li> <li>• Has the management structure of the institution been endorsed by the academic community?</li> <li>• Is the internal organisational structure fit for purpose?</li> <li>• What management committees are in place? Are they working adequately?</li> </ul> |



| Quality aspects to be assessed           | Criteria  | Looking for evidence   |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Human resources management</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution takes care of high-quality academic and support staff by clearly defining their responsibilities, by evaluating their performance on a regular basis and by means of an adequate staff appraisal system.</li> <li>• The institution provides for               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a system for staff development to enhance the knowledge and skills of academic and support staff in conducting activities that have a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning</li> <li>• evaluation of the effectiveness of the provided training</li> <li>• compilation of records of education, experience, training, and other essential qualifications required of academic and support staff.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The institution establishes an activity plan and evaluates activities to encourage students, academic and support staff to be conscious in their thoughts and speech.</li> <li>• The institution enhances the professional ethics of its students, academic and support staff.</li> </ul> | <p>How does the institution select and appoint its academic and support staff?</p> <p>Is an adequate staff appraisal system in place for use in evaluating performance and promotion?</p> <p>How is staff performance evaluated?</p> <p>What opportunities are given for staff development and training?</p> <p>How does the institution evaluate the efficiency of its staff development activities?</p> <p>How does the institution stimulate the ethics of its students, academics and other staff?</p> |

| Quality aspects to be assessed        | Criteria   | Looking for evidence  |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Financial resources management</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate funding to achieve its goals and objectives.</li> <li>• The institution has an adequate financial management system.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the institution funded?</li> <li>• Are the sources of the financial resources and the conditions attached to the funding transparent? Do these restrict the institution’s decision-making autonomy in teaching and research?</li> <li>• Are the aims, goals and objectives realistic and achievable with the funding provided?</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Educational activities</b>         | <p><b>Academic programmes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The programmes on offer at the institution                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• meeting the expectations of the stakeholders</li> <li>• have clearly formulated expected learning outcomes</li> <li>• are coherent</li> <li>• are up to date.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear education policy, expressing clearly the principles for choosing programmes?</li> <li>• Does the policy clearly express rules for curriculum design and review, including the involvement of stakeholders?</li> <li>• Are the academic programmes in line with the mission statement of the institution and principles of employability?</li> <li>• Are the programmes on offer based on an overarching didactic concept that has been adequately communicated to and realised by the teaching staff?</li> <li>• Do the qualifications offered correspond with international standards?</li> </ul> |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria   | Looking for evidence   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
|                                | <p><b>Student assessment:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has well-functioning student assessment systems for all programmes on offer and clear rules to ensure the quality of the assessments.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear policy to ensure that the examinations are objective, equivalent and trustworthy.</li> <li>• The institution takes care of the consistency of the examinations, consistency between programmes and consistency in time.</li> <li>• The institution has a policy to promote a variety of assessments methods.</li> <li>• The institution takes care that examination committees function adequately and perform the statutory tasks.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent do assessments and examinations cover the objectives of the course and of the programme as a whole?</li> <li>• Do the assessments have clear and published grading/marking criteria? Are the pass/fail criteria clear?</li> <li>• Are a variety of assessment methods used? What are they?</li> <li>• Are the assessment/examination regulations clear?</li> <li>• Are the procedures clear? Are they well known? Well followed?</li> <li>• Are any safeguards in place to ensure objectivity?</li> <li>• Are the students satisfied with the procedures? What about complaints from students?</li> <li>• Do clear rules exist for re-assessment and are students satisfied with these?</li> </ul> |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria   | Looking for evidence   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
|                                | <p><b>Quality of staff:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staff are competent and qualified.</li> <li>• Recruitment and promotion of academic staff are based on a merit system, which includes teaching, research and services.</li> <li>• Duties allocated are appropriate to qualifications, experience and aptitude.</li> <li>• A time management and incentive system support the quality of teaching and learning.</li> <li>• There are provisions for review, consultation and redeployment.</li> <li>• Termination, retirement and social benefits are planned and well implemented.</li> <li>• There is a well-planned staff appraisal system based on fair and objective measures in the spirit of enhancement which is carried out regularly.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the academic staff competent and qualified for their job?</li> <li>• Are there any problems with the human resources?</li> <li>• Age profiles? Vacancies difficult to fill? What difficulties are there in attracting qualified staff?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the employment of staff, both in teaching and research?</li> <li>• How are the academic staff prepared for the teaching task?</li> <li>• What about teaching load? The staff: student ratio? The staff: graduate ratio?</li> <li>• Is staff recruitment based on experience in teaching and research?</li> <li>• Is there a system of staff appraisal?</li> <li>• What role do teaching qualifications and teaching activities play in the staff members' careers?</li> <li>• What does the institution think of its human resources policy so far?</li> <li>• What future developments are there?</li> </ul> |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria   | Looking for evidence   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
|                                | <p><b>Quality of staff:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staff are competent and qualified.</li> <li>• Recruitment and promotion of academic staff are based on a merit system, which includes teaching, research and services.</li> <li>• Duties allocated are appropriate to qualifications, experience and aptitude.</li> <li>• A time management and incentive system support the quality of teaching and learning.</li> <li>• There are provisions for review, consultation and redeployment.</li> <li>• Termination, retirement and social benefits are planned and well implemented.</li> <li>• There is a well-planned staff appraisal system based on fair and objective measures in the spirit of enhancement which is carried out regularly.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the academic staff competent and qualified for their job?</li> <li>• Are there any problems with the human resources?</li> <li>• Age profiles? Vacancies difficult to fill? What difficulties are there in attracting qualified staff?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the employment of staff, both in teaching and research?</li> <li>• How are the academic staff prepared for the teaching task?</li> <li>• What about teaching load? The staff: student ratio? The staff: graduate ratio?</li> <li>• Is staff recruitment based on experience in teaching and research?</li> <li>• Is there a system of staff appraisal?</li> <li>• What role do teaching qualifications and teaching activities play in the staff members' careers?</li> <li>• What does the institution think of its human resources policy so far?</li> <li>• What future developments are there?</li> </ul> |
|                                | <p><b>Student admission:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has clearly formulated admission criteria for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.</li> <li>• If there is selection, the procedures and criteria are clear, adequate and transparent.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you analyse the development of the student intake? Reasons to worry? Causes of problems? Prospects for future?</li> <li>• What are the admission procedures? Are students selected? If so, how are they selected? What are the requirements?</li> <li>• What policy is pursued with regard to the intake of students? Does the institution aim to increase the intake or to stabilise it? Why?</li> <li>• What measures are taken to ensure the quality and size of the intake?</li> <li>• What effect do these measures have?</li> </ul>  |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria   | Looking for evidence  |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
|                                | <p><b>Facilities and infrastructure:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The physical resources for the educational activities including equipment, materials and information technology are sufficient.</li> <li>• Equipment is up to date, readily available and effectively developed.</li> <li>• The institution’s computer centres provide a highly accessible and reliable computer network infrastructure that enables the institution community to fully exploit information technology for teaching, research and development, services and administration.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Teaching rooms:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are enough lecture halls, seminar rooms, laboratories, reading rooms, and computer rooms available? Do these meet the relevant requirements?</li> <li>• Is the library sufficiently equipped for education?</li> <li>• Is the library within easy reach (location, opening hours)?</li> <li>• Are laboratory facilities and support staff sufficient?</li> </ul> <p><b>Teaching aids and tools:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are sufficient audio-visual aids available?</li> <li>• Are there enough computers? Appropriate and enough computer programs (computer-aided education, mathematics programs, design programs, etc.)?</li> <li>• To what extent do the facilities/ infrastructure promote or hinder delivery of the programmes?</li> <li>• Is the total budget for aids and tools sufficient?</li> </ul> |
|                                | <p><b>Library services:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has adequate library facilities, including technology-aided learning materials to enable students to acquire information, knowledge and skills.</li> <li>• The library uses technology as a learning resource and manages its activities in a technology-enabled way.</li> <li>• The library has mechanisms to regularly evaluate the adequacy and accessibility of resources and services for students and takes appropriate remedial measures to address inadequacies.</li> </ul>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated library policy/strategy or equivalent?</li> <li>• Are the library resources sufficient to meet the requirements of the full-time, part-time and distance students?</li> </ul>  |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria   | Looking for evidence   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
|                                | <p><b>Student support and progression:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The institution provides efficient academic support services geared towards ensuring the quality of the academic outcomes and enhancing student success.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the student support system sufficient and efficient?</li> <li>Does the institution have a diagnosis and remedial programme in place?</li> <li>Does the institution have a well-structured, organised, proactive guidance and counselling unit which is accessible to all students?</li> <li>Does the institution have sufficient infrastructure and facilities for social, cultural, sport and leisure time activities for students?</li> <li>Does the institution promote the active participation of students in social, cultural, sport and leisure time activities?</li> </ul> |
|                                | <p><b>Social welfare:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The institution has adequate facilities for sports and recreation; health facilities, student hostels, guidance and counselling services and student support services are adequate.</li> <li>The institution has an approved and widely disseminated social welfare policy that aims at enhancing the quality of student life.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated social welfare policy that aims at enhancing the quality of student life?</li> <li>Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated policy on welcoming new students in place?</li> <li>Does the institution have an approved and widely disseminated policy on welcoming foreign students in place?</li> <li>Are there adequate student counselling services equipped with qualified and competent staff?</li> </ul>  |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria  | Looking for evidence  |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Research</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a clear research policy, setting the direction of research and deciding about the research profile and research activities.</li> <li>• The institution has a clear policy for the protection of creative efforts and especially for the protection of economic investment in creative efforts (Intellectual Property Rights Policy).</li> <li>• The institution has a clear code of conduct for research, including a code of ethics.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear and widely disseminated research policy or equivalent, setting the direction of research?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a policy on intellectual property rights?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a clear code of conduct for research, including a code of ethics?</li> <li>• How do the research activities reflect the mission and goals of the institution?</li> </ul> |
| <b>Community engagement</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has clear guidelines for consultancy and community engagement.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear policy, strategy and guidelines for consultancy and community engagement?</li> <li>• What role does the institution play in the local, national and international community?</li> <li>• Is there evidence of an institutional contribution to society and the community?</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Benchmarking</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution uses the instrument of benchmarking for analysing the quality of its core activities and its management.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the institution using the instrument of benchmarking? How is it using the instrument?</li> <li>• Does the top management use the collected information to inform decision making?</li> </ul>  |



*A proposed framework for the best practice in Quality Assurance in Namibian Higher education institutions*

| <b>Quality aspects to be assessed</b> | <b>Criteria</b>   | <b>Looking for evidence</b>   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Quality assurance</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has an adequate and effective internal quality assurance system.</li> </ul>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a clear policy and procedures or handbook for quality assurance?</li> <li>• Does the institution have an adequate monitoring system?</li> <li>• Is there a periodic review of the institution's core mandated activities?</li> <li>• Does the institution use the instrument of benchmarking for analysing the quality of its mandated activities and its management?</li> <li>• Is it standard practice to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the institution's quality assurance management system?</li> <li>• Are actions taken to address risks after evaluation?</li> <li>• Is there evidence for all these?</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Stakeholder satisfaction</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution has a structured method for obtaining feedback from its stakeholders.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is regular student evaluation carried out? How is it done? Is it adequate?</li> <li>• What is done with the results of student evaluations?</li> <li>• Does the institution have an insight into the opinion and feedback of graduates when they are employed?</li> <li>• Are the complaints or positive feedback received from alumni used to adapt the programmes?</li> <li>• Are there any structured contracts with employers and the labour market for obtaining feedback?</li> <li>• How do the employers appreciate graduates?</li> <li>• Are there any specific complaints?</li> <li>• Are specific strengths appreciated by employers?</li> <li>• Does the institution have any tools to obtain feedback from society?</li> </ul> |

| Quality aspects to be assessed | Criteria   | Looking for evidence  |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Internationalisation</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><i>The institution has adequate policies and procedures to deal with international affairs.</i></b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the institution have a policy/strategy or equivalent on internalisation?</li> <li>• Is there evidence of workable links with other institutions nationally and internationally?</li> <li>• Does the institution have a strategy to attract and host international students and visiting scholars in place?</li> </ul> |

Higher education institutions should assume responsibility for quality assurance practices. Assessment should be based on previously agreed upon objectives and criteria. Accordingly, internal and external assessment should form part of an integrated approach to quality assurance based on internal self-assessment combined with external or peer assessment. Combining internal self-assessment with external or peer assessment would ensure validity; objectivity and credibility of self-assessment as nobody can be a fair judge of his or her own case (cf. COL, 2010).

The framework highlights five conditions that lead to an effective internal quality assurance, namely:

- It is important not to rely on a single quality assurance instrument, such as the student questionnaires; rather there should be a mixture of several instruments to ensure good intelligence. These instruments should be related to institutional strategies and academic values and their costs and benefits should be reviewed regularly: this includes not only financial costs and benefits but also psychological aspects (e.g. do they lead to unnecessary stress or unreasonable workloads) and whether they really contribute to embedding an effective and shared quality culture, supporting the institutional strategy and providing accountability towards students and the wider public.
- The most effective internal quality assurance arrangements are those that derive from effective internal decision-making processes and structures. Having clear lines of accountability and clarifying responsibilities at all levels ensures that the quality assurance system is kept as simple as possible while closing the feedback loops; this should, if anything, reduce bureaucracy by limiting data collection, reports and committees to what is absolutely necessary. It is crucial to identify who needs to know what and, furthermore, to distinguish between what is necessary versus what it would be nice to know. In addition, students and staff feel at home, first and foremost, in their faculties and departments. This argues in favour of an optimal balance between the need for a string institutional core and a degree of faculty responsibilities, between the need for an institution-wide quality assurance approach and some local variations in faculties.
- Like external quality assurance, internal quality assurance processes are also about power. Internal quality assurance can be contested if it does not successfully engage the institution's community. Leadership is essential to give the initial direction and the broad frameworks of quality assurance mechanisms. Leadership should

facilitate internal debate – and even tolerate dissent – in order to make sure that quality assurance processes do not end up being imposed. Linked to this, the type of language used by the leadership and the quality assurance officers in describing the quality assurance arrangements cannot be dismissed as trivial. The more academic and the less managerial it is, the more likely it will make inroads in the institution.

- It is essential to invest in people through staff development to avoid internal quality assurance arrangements becoming punitive.
- Both institutional autonomy and self-confidence are key factors in the capacity of institutions to define quality and the purposes of their internal quality assurance processes, and to ensure that these are in line with their specific profiles, strategies and organisational cultures. In doing so, these institutions might sometimes be confronted with external quality assurance agencies' processes, which might be at cross-purposes. It is essential that internal and external processes are viewed together and that the higher education community – the institutions and the agencies – negotiate the articulation between the two sets of processes in order to ensure true accountability, and avoid duplication of evaluations and quality assurance fatigue (EUA, 2011).

### **Embedding a quality culture within higher education institutions**

The effective implementation of internal quality assurance requires a commitment to a strong quality culture (Gvaramadze, 2008). “Creating a culture of quality within a higher education institution means agreeing on a common definition of the concept of a quality culture” (Harvey & Green, 1993). The concept of a quality culture describes the shared values and collective responsibilities of all members of higher education institutions. It is therefore built on a bottom-up approach which develops academic community through values, attitudes and behaviours within the institution (EUA, 2003). In the EUA perspective, quality culture is an internal organisational culture with permanent enhancement mechanisms at two distinct levels, namely:

- **Institutional level:** A structural and managerial element in order to enhance the quality and coordination of members. This refers to quality as an enhancement process.
- **Individual/student and staff level:** Cultural and psychological level of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality culture among individuals. This refers to quality as a transformation process.

Commitment to a culture of quality requires the involvement of all the relevant stakeholders (cf. Wahab, 2010). For the purposes of this framework stakeholders are divided into two main categories, internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include academic staff, students, top management, middle management and support staff. External stakeholders include community, alumni, industry/corporate sector, parents and organisations (government, regulatory bodies, accreditation bodies, professional bodies, etc.). The roles and responsibilities, and contributions of all these stakeholders in the pursuit of quality assurance and a quality culture need to be clearly spelt out and widely disseminated.

## **Conclusion**

Provision of quality higher education has become essential for the survival of higher education institutions in the highly competitive higher education space. Higher education institutions are expected to implement systematic approaches to quality assurance to ensure high academic standards, integrity and accountability. The development of systematic quality assurance is a long and complex process that requires the resources, competencies and continuous efforts of all stakeholders. Different frameworks for quality assurance have been implemented to facilitate quality assurance in higher education institutions throughout the world.

This paper presented the findings of the research study which was conducted to investigate the phenomenon of mechanisms for quality assurance in higher education institutions in Namibia. The study found that excellence is a cornerstone of academia, but that the quest for quality has acquired a new urgency in recent years. It also unfolded that stakeholder demand for quality higher education, competition, mass access to higher education, student and staff mobility, and the demand for an international market, are among the main drivers of change in the higher education arena that are providing the incentives for introducing the new paradigm for quality assurance.

The implementation of a more structured approach to quality assurance is, however, deemed to be a challenge for higher education institutions in Namibia. Based on the findings, the study made recommendations aimed at the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. The recommendations are contained in the proposed framework for best practice in quality assurance in Namibian Higher education institutions.

The focal point of the proposed framework is the improvement of the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. The framework identified four main phases in quality assurance, namely *planning, implementation, evaluation and assessment*, and *review*. It also identified self-assessment, operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclical basis, as an important tool for closing the quality loop. This should be backed by structured methods for obtaining feedback from stakeholders and for benchmarking as a way to learn from the best practices. The involvement of all relevant stakeholders in all aspects of quality assurance has been also strongly recommended in this publication as an important aspect of a successful quality assurance system. The framework suggests internationally benchmarked criteria for self-assessment, which can be adapted by higher education institutions in Namibia to ensure international comparability.

The framework finally identified the need to embed a 'quality culture' in higher education institutions as an important aspect of the successful implementation of internal quality assurance systems, mechanisms and processes. It is hoped that this framework will provide useful references of best practice in quality assurance in Namibian higher education institutions and bring about much needed improvement in the practice of quality assurance in higher education in Namibia. It is hoped that this proposed framework will provide a useful reference of good practice.

This study, the first of its kind in Namibia, addressed an important issue of concern in a relatively young higher education system in Namibia, where the quality assurance systems are relatively underdeveloped as became evident from the research findings which established that, despite a variety of developments in quality assurance, as of yet, there

seems to be no systematic approaches to internal quality assurance in higher education institutions in Namibia.

The study, furthermore, contributes to the important debate on quality assurance in higher education and will, hopefully, provide insights into the future direction of this dynamic topic in the Namibian higher education system. It may reveal continuing challenges in quality assurance in higher education and in areas of quality assurance in which deeper understanding may be needed and this, in turn, may provide an agenda for further discussion, research and development. Finally, it is hoped that this study will increase awareness and insight, and change the existing notions about the importance of a well-structured and well embedded internal quality assurance system and that this will eventually lead to improvements in the practice academic practices in higher education in Namibia.

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