Navigating Emerging Trends in Internal and External Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education

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Quality assurance is globally understood as a kind of guarantee that institutions, no matter their age, status, or academic focus, will provide an appropriate education to their students while offering value to society and operating within global norms. However, tertiary education's growing diversification around the world makes such universal assertions increasingly problematic. Inherently trusting internal motivations for quality is a similarly dubious proposition.

Tertiary education is facing major changes and challenges. As the sector evolves in response, it is not guaranteed that our current systems are fit for purpose. For example, the quality assurance (QA) domain is grappling with significant questions about QA systems' potential to embrace the shifting paradigms, learning modes, technological trends, and other challenges affecting tertiary education around the world.

The *Global Trends in Higher Education Quality Assurance* project represents one attempt to analyze QA systems' capacity. This comprehensive study covers tertiary education QA developments across all major world regions (i.e., Africa, the Arab States, the Asia-Pacific region, Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America). Published once every five years, *Global Trends* examines the developmental patterns and obstacles characterizing internal and external quality assurance (IQA and EQA, respectively) worldwide. The most recent edition focuses on the concepts of *efficiency*, *relevance*, and *transformative power.* These notions are situated in the context of global megatrends, including QA's capacity to support and promote the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, the 2019 UN Global Recognition Convention, and the recently revised five UN regional recognition conventions. The authors collectively sought to better understand the potential for IQA and EQA to ensure "quality education for all" and the ways in which QA contributes (or should contribute) to promoting qualification recognition regionally and globally.

Internal Quality Assurance in an Evolving Global Context

A widespread assumption suggests that institutions are primarily responsible for QA, with IQA presumably taking precedence. It is thus somewhat counterintuitive that IQA usually follows EQA rather than the other way around. Put differently, formal internal structures for QA have been established and guided by EQA bodies' evolution. This circumstance has led to pervasive skepticism that EQA truly comprehends local institutional contexts.

The language used to operationalize quality within institutions conveys limited consensus beyond holding "excellence" as a common IQA focus. This convenient vagueness allows standards to be flexed in support of institutional narratives about successful educational activities instead of facilitating a rigorous assessment of quality practices and outcomes.

Even without global agreement on the idea of quality, IQA processes are remarkably harmonious. For instance, IQA typically relies on self-study conducted by centralized units and managed by QA specialists. It is unclear how the same processes can be effective across such diverse institutional types with imprecise operational definitions of quality.

In this evolving context, the technological transformation exemplified by artificial intelligence (AI) poses both opportunities and threats. On the one hand, AI can simplify and accelerate data collection and analysis; on the other hand, the sheer volume of data that can now be easily amassed presents a risk of information overload. It also stokes cynicism around an increasingly dehumanized QA process that cannot differentiate real quality from fake AI-generated evidence.

Key Observations Shaping External Quality Assurance Practices

The following key observations shape EQA practices globally. It is imperative to look at EQA in the larger tertiary education ecosystem and the expectations set for it. To start with, the global education narrative has seen a profound transformation—from the promise of mere *access to education* to the expectation of *access to quality education.* More than a semantic change, this shift redefines the roles and responsibilities of QA worldwide. However, the challenge is clear: without adequate capacity to ensure quality across distinct regions and systems, the world cannot move beyond an exclusive

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space where quality is an ivory-tower privilege for the few rather than a universal right of all.

Secondly, EQA is valued for its oversight and the trust it builds in credentials. However, IQA and EQA both remain largely reactive, which limits their ability to address a rapidly diversifying tertiary education landscape. Globally, QA is mostly voluntary, with scarce systemic triggers for implementation. Fewer than half of institutions undergo regular QA; many are only starting or lack related systems entirely. This divergence is striking: of the nearly 100,000 institutions at UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education levels 5–8, about half have faced multiple, repetitive external reviews (causing accreditation fatigue). The other half have never been covered by QA at all.

The consistency of core definitions and practices represents a third pertinent factor. Positively, international, regional, and specialized QA networks are growing in number and influence. These networks foster convergence, collaboration, and capacity building. Despite ongoing—and growing—debates on what constitutes *quality education*, no global consensus has been achieved on "quality" in education or on QA methodologies, particularly measurement approaches. This lack of clarity leads to inconsistent qualification recognition and varying interpretations of "quality education" worldwide.

It is also important to consider the expansion of transnational education and cross-border QA. Recently, more QA bodies have extended their services beyond national borders, where home-country accreditors oversee institutions abroad. Drivers include strategic, financial, and political incentives; distrust in national accreditors of host systems further fuels this trend. However, transnational education often lacks adequate EQA mechanisms for appraising transnational education provisions' quality and impacts in unique sociopolitical environments and cultures. This issue complicates credential validation and qualification recognition. In some cases, national (host) QA systems exclude transnational education from their regulatory oversight. This decision gives cross-border accreditors the floor to fill gaps, sometimes without local recognition, and threatens credential acceptance.

Finally, evaluators need to be evaluated as well. Without proper oversight of external evaluators themselves, "accreditation mills" pose a real risk. Of roughly 800 accreditors worldwide, only 178 are externally recognized by standards such as INQAAHE's International Standards and Guidelines, ENQA's Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, or equivalent. This void raises concerns about fair and transparent recognition. In the absence of an independent, globally accepted mechanism for accreditor recognition, trust in QA is dubious.

Concluding Remarks

Existing QA collaboration through cross-border partnerships, global and regional QA networks, and international conventions has advanced harmonization, mutual recognition, and institutional capacity building. Yet these realities raise critical questions that demand action. The rapid diversification of tertiary education providers, the surge in alternative credentials, and the rise of digital and AI-driven learning models are outpacing traditional QA frameworks anchored in conventional practices. Meanwhile, the weight of geopolitical tensions, economic inequalities, and environmental crises looms large. The challenge is clear: QA must evolve or risk irrelevance. The future of education depends on our ability to innovate, collaborate, and ensure that *quality education* is not confined to the privileged few, but guaranteed for all.

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