

The Use of Internal and External Quality Assurance in Higher Learning Institutions: A Case of a University in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is vital for maintaining and enhancing academic standards. This study explores the roles and underlying purposes of both internal and external quality assurance (IQA and EQA) mechanisms within higher learning institutions. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through unstructured interview guides administered to ten (10) university lecturers. A case study of X University was conducted, which demonstrated the implementation of robust IQA and EQA systems, highlighting both best practices and associated challenges. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data.

Findings revealed that participants had a clear understanding of both IQA and EQA. Identified roles of IQA included self-regulation, internal review, assessment, curriculum development, promotion of a quality culture, continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement, and faculty development. EQA roles encompassed external evaluations, accreditation, auditing, regulatory compliance, benchmarking, public accountability, and assurance of adherence to national and international standards. The alignment of internal and external QA was identified as a best practice contributing to the university's positive reputation.

Challenges noted included limited financial and human resources, time constraints, and resistance to change. The study recommends that university management prioritize resourcing QA activities through government and private sector support. Furthermore, orientation and short-term training programs for lecturers should be implemented to address resistance to change. Finally, alignment between IQA and EQA processes should be strengthened, with institutional leaders promoting a culture of shared responsibility and integrity in QA practices.

Keywords: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance, higher education, quality assurance mechanisms, educational standards, assessment, accreditation, curriculum review, institutional development, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education has gained significant attention over the past few decades as institutions strive to meet the demands of stakeholders and ensure the delivery of high-quality education and needed to be explored in order to check on its applicability, its challenges and best practice. The dual mechanisms of internal and external quality assurance are pivotal in this endeavor, offering complementary approaches to maintaining and enhancing educational standards.

Internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to the processes and practices implemented within an institution to monitor, assess, and improve its own educational offerings. These processes are typically continuous and integral to the institution's daily operations. They involve self-assessment, internal reviews, and the development of a quality culture among staff and students. According to [13], IQA fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among faculty and promotes a culture of continuous improvement, self-regulation, improving processes through curriculum review, faculty development and student feedback.

Conversely, external quality assurance (EQA) involves the evaluation of an institution's quality standards by an independent body, often at a national or regional level. EQA mechanisms include accreditation, audits, and external reviews, which provide an objective assessment of an institution's performance and adherence to predefined standards. These processes not only ensure accountability but also enhance transparency and trust in the higher education system. As noted by [6], EQA serves as a crucial tool for public assurance and institutional accountability to the national and international standards.

The interplay between internal and external quality assurance is vital for the holistic development of higher education institutions. While internal mechanisms cultivate a proactive and improvement-oriented culture within institutions, external mechanisms provide the necessary validation and benchmarking against global standards. This dual approach ensures that institutions not only meet their internal goals but also align with external expectations and best practices.

As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, the role of quality assurance becomes increasingly significant. Institutions must adeptly balance their internal processes with external requirements to achieve excellence in education and research. As argued by [18], the integration of IQA and EQA processes can lead to more effective and sustainable quality management systems in higher education. Additionally, [15] emphasizes the importance of developing a quality culture that is ingrained in the daily practices of higher education institutions, which can be achieved through the synergistic application of IQA and EQA.

Moreover, the role of quality assurance has been evolving to accommodate the changing landscape of higher education. With the increasing emphasis on internationalization, technological advancements, and the diversification of educational offerings, both internal and external quality assurance systems must adapt to address these new challenges. As asserted by [11], the evolving context of higher education necessitates a dynamic and responsive quality assurance framework.

Furthermore, the impact of quality assurance on educational outcomes has been the subject of extensive research. According to [4], effective quality assurance practices lead to improved educational processes and outcomes by identifying areas of improvement and facilitating the implementation of necessary changes. Similarly, [2] highlights that quality assurance mechanisms help institutions align their educational objectives with the expectations of students, employers, and society at large.

In addition to these considerations, quality assurance processes must also address the growing importance of student engagement and feedback. As noted by [17], incorporating student perspectives into quality assurance practices can significantly enhance the relevance and effectiveness of educational programs. This approach not only improves educational quality but also fosters a more inclusive and participatory academic environment.

In conclusion, the effective use of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms is essential for higher learning institutions to maintain high standards, foster continuous improvement, and achieve global competitiveness. The ongoing challenge lies in harmonizing these processes to create a coherent and comprehensive quality assurance framework. As higher education institutions navigate an increasingly complex environment, the integration of IQA and EQA will be crucial in ensuring sustainable and impactful quality assurance practices.

Significance of the Study

The study on the use of internal and external quality assurance in higher learning institutions is significant as it highlighted the essential mechanisms that ensure the quality, accountability, and continuous improvement of educational offerings. This contributes to the overall development of higher education, benefiting students, institutions, and society at large.

The study promoted and aimed at enhancing educational standards. This is because the study explored the crucial role of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in higher learning institutions. Understanding and implementing these mechanisms were vital for maintaining and improving educational standards, which directly impacts the quality of graduates entering the workforce.

The other importance is that of bring out the issue of benchmarking and best practices. External quality assurance provides opportunities for benchmarking against national and international standards. It facilitates the sharing of best practices across institutions, enabling them to learn from each other and adopt successful strategies for improving educational quality.

It also brought about the issue of student satisfaction and outcomes. Effective quality assurance mechanisms contribute to higher levels of student satisfaction and better educational outcomes. By ensuring that academic programs meet rigorous standards, institutions can provide students with a valuable learning experience, enhancing their academic and professional prospects. Stakeholder confidence is promoted. The study underscores the importance of quality assurance in building confidence among various stakeholders, including students, parents, employers, and policymakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the related literature focused on quality assurance, internal quality assurance and external quality assurance as well as challenges. Quality assurance (QA) involves the implementation of systematic activities and procedures to ensure that educational services meet established standards and fulfill stakeholder expectations. It encompasses the entire educational process, including curriculum design, teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, and administrative support. Quality assurance in higher learning institutions has become a focal point in educational research and policy-making. Internal and external quality assurance mechanisms are pivotal in maintaining and enhancing educational standards, ensuring accountability, and fostering continuous improvement.

Internal Quality Assurance

Internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to the processes and practices implemented within an educational institution to monitor, evaluate, and enhance the quality of its programs and services. It includes activities such as curriculum review, faculty development, student feedback mechanisms, and internal audits. Internal quality assurance is based on mechanism, practice and impact on institutional improvement in bringing about quality.

Mechanisms and Practices

Internal quality assurance involves processes and practices that institutions undertake to monitor and improve their educational offerings. According to [16], internal quality assurance mechanisms include self-evaluations, internal audits, and continuous improvement and improvement of processes such as feedback loops, curriculum review and staff development aimed at fostering a culture of quality within institutions.

Impact on Institutional Improvement

[15] Argues that internal quality assurance mechanisms significantly impact institutional improvement by promoting self-reflection and institutional learning. The study highlights that institutions with robust internal quality assurance systems are better positioned to identify weaknesses and implement necessary improvements.

External Quality Assurance

External Quality Assurance (EQA) involves the evaluation of an educational institution's quality by external bodies or agencies. It includes activities such as accreditation, external audits, and peer reviews to ensure compliance with established standards and to promote accountability and transparency. Quality under external quality assurance signifies excellence in meeting the requirements or specifications set forth by stakeholders, whether they be customers, regulatory bodies, or internal or external standards. The focus in this study was based on accreditation, evaluation, comparative studies and best practices offered by external bodies in the university institutions.

Accreditation and Evaluation

External quality assurance typically involves accreditation and evaluation by external bodies. [7] Emphasize that external evaluations provide an independent assessment of an institution's quality, which can enhance public trust and ensure accountability.

Comparative Studies and Best Practices

[10] Provide a comparative analysis of external quality assurance practices across different countries, highlighting the benefits of benchmarking and sharing best practices. Their study demonstrates that external quality assurance can drive institutions to align with international standards and adopt innovative practices.

Integrated Approach

Integrated approach is a combining both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. An integrated approach fosters a culture of continuous improvement, where feedback from both internal assessments and external evaluations informs strategic planning and policy development. Effective quality assurance requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrative staff, and external bodies, to ensure comprehensive and inclusive quality enhancement.

Combining Internal and External Quality Assurance

[11] Argue that an integrated approach of combining both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms, is essential for comprehensive quality management in higher education. Their study suggests that such an approach ensures continuous improvement and sustained quality enhancement and the institutions need to develop systems where internal and external quality assurance mechanisms are not only aligned but also mutually reinforcing.

Challenges and Opportunities

[14] Discuss the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing integrated quality assurance systems. They note that while integration can lead to more coherent and effective quality assurance practices, it also requires careful coordination and alignment of internal and external processes.

The literature on internal and external quality assurance in higher learning institutions underscores the importance of both mechanisms in ensuring educational quality and fostering continuous improvement. Studies by authors provide valuable insights into the practices, impacts, and integration of quality assurance systems. These studies collectively highlight the need for a balanced and integrated approach to quality assurance in higher education, ensuring that institutions can meet evolving educational standards and societal expectations. This literature review demonstrates the critical role that quality assurance plays in the higher education sector and provides a foundation for further research and policy development in this area.

Research Gap

The gap lies in the area of not exploring the roles and effectiveness of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in higher learning institutions simultaneously. Some authors just focused on internal quality assurance only while other authors focused only on external quality assurance. However, this study explored the roles and effectiveness of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in higher learning institutions simultaneously.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach and a case study was used to comprehensively understand the use of internal and external quality assurance in higher learning institutions [8]. The method allowed a robust analysis of the mechanisms, impacts, and effectiveness of quality assurance processes.

Data Collection instruments

Unstructured Interviews

unstructured interviews guide was used and interviews were conducted with lecturers as one of the key stakeholders. These interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of those directly involved in quality assurance processes. According to [8], unstructured interviews allow for flexibility and in-depth in exploring complex issues related to quality assurance.

Member Checking

Member checking was employed to verify the accuracy of qualitative data by sharing findings with participants for validation. [9] Suggest that member checking is a crucial step in establishing credibility in qualitative research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant case study institution before data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants by signing on the consent form, ensuring their understanding of the study's purpose and their right to participate or withdraw at any time. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants was maintained throughout the research process, in line with guidelines of keeping information shared confidentially and use it for academic purpose and hiding participant and institutional identity with pseudonyms [1].

RESULTS

During presentation under internal quality assurance (IQA) focused on self-regulation and continuous improvement within institutions, involving processes such as curriculum review, faculty development, and student feedback systems. External quality assurance (EQA), on the other hand, the focus was on evaluation done by external bodies, accreditation agencies, and adherence to national and international standards. The interplay between IQA and EQA ensures a comprehensive QA framework, promoting accountability, transparency, and academic excellence were considered.

Meaning of internal and external quality assurance

The researchers administered a question to find out if participants new the meaning of internal and external quality assurance.

Lecturer '1' stated that,

"To start with quality assurance is a continuous process of monitoring, evaluation and improvement of procedures, tools, policies, services, personnel in order to uphold services and products whereas internal quality assurance (IQA) is a process and practice of implementing within an institution aspects of monitoring, assessment, and improving its own educational offerings".

Lecturer '2' echoed that, "It is a continuous process and integral to the institution's daily operations such as assessment of students.

Lecturer '3'

Gave the examples of internal quality assurance practices as: Course Evaluations: involving regular surveys of students regarding course content, teaching effectiveness, and overall satisfaction. Program Reviews: the comprehensive evaluations of academic programs to assess relevance, effectiveness, and alignment with institutional goals. Institutional Self-Study: the in-depth self-assessment reports submitted periodically to review institutional performance. Quality enhancement as initiatives to improve teaching, learning, and research activities. Faculty development which involves training and professional development opportunities

for faculty to improve teaching quality and research outputs. Student support services which involves assessment and enhancement of services such as counseling, career guidance, and academic advising.

Lecturer ‘1’ echoed that external quality assurance (EQA) involves the evaluation of an institution's quality standards by an independent body, often at a national or regional level such as Zambia Qualification Authority (ZAQUA) in Zambia.

Lecturer ‘2’ stated that, there are process of external quality assurance done such as preparation: this is where institutions prepare for external evaluations by reviewing their practices and compiling necessary documentation.

Lecturer ‘3’ pointed out the other process which was named as “evaluation in which external reviewers or accreditation bodies conduct assessments through site visits, interviews, and documentation review”.

Lecturer ‘10’ narrated on the other process called report: this is where external bodies provide a detailed report with findings, recommendations, and required actions.

Lecturer ‘5’ reported that, “ is a follow-up process in which institutions address any identified issues and implement improvements as recommended by external reviewers”.

Lecturer ‘4’

Gave examples of external quality assurance agencies namely: Accreditation Bodies: The organizations such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) or the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). National Agencies: The government or regional bodies responsible for overseeing educational standards and quality. International Organizations: Entities like the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) or the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

The roles of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in higher learning institutions

The roles of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in higher learning institutions were reflected in the responses from the lecturers as reflected in Table 1 and figure 1 below.

Role of internal quality

The researchers asked respondents concerning the role of internal quality and external quality assurance their responses were as follows;

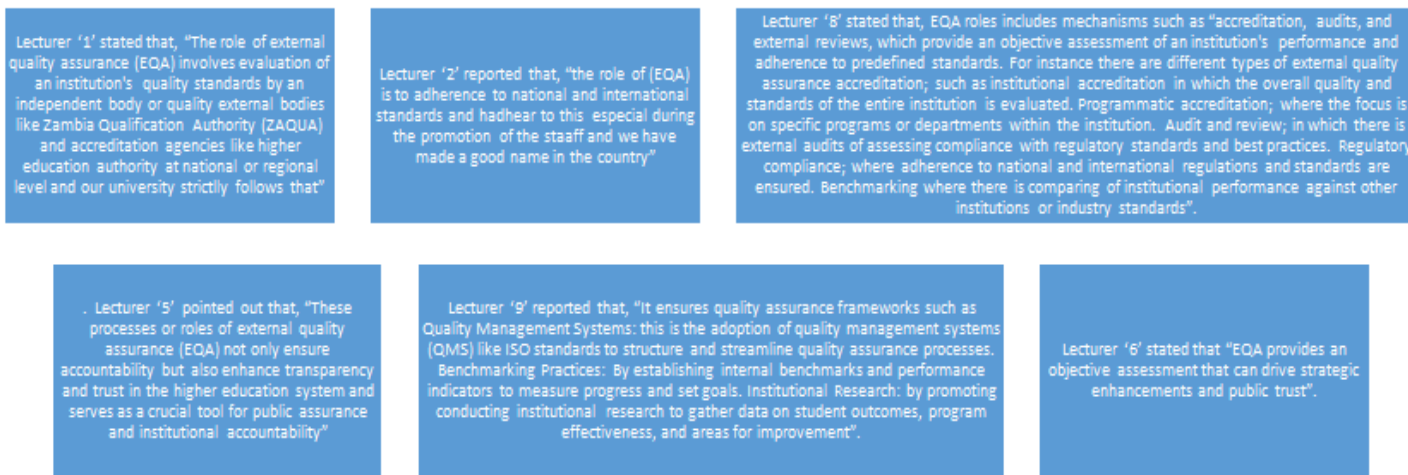
Table 1 Lecturers response concerning the role of internal quality assurance (IQA)

Lecturer ‘1’ pointed out that “self-regulation and continuous improvement within institutions are some of the roles of internal quality”.	Lecturer ‘8’ stated that, under IQA involves stakeholder involvement such as: the use of governance structures which involves governance bodies such as university councils and academic boards in setting and reviewing quality standards.
Lecturer ‘2’ narrated that “The role of internal quality assurance (IQA) involve processes such as curriculum review, faculty development, and student feedback systems assurance this has resulted in having a steady progress of a good number of doctor of philosophy among lecturers at this university and this year we may have more of them graduating from our university”.	Lecturer ‘9’ mentioned that “Quality assurance role is to plans such as the creation of strategic plans which helps in achieving and maintaining quality which was administered at our institute”.
Lecturer ‘4’ said that, IQA is a process which fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among faculty and promotes a culture of continuous improvement.	Lecturer ‘3’ stated that,” IQA involve self-assessment, internal reviews, and the development of a quality culture among staff and students. This has made our university to have a good reputation”.

Lecturer '6' stated that, "Internal quality assurance comprised of academic standards this involves development and monitoring of academic standards and criteria for programs and courses.	Lecturer '10' reported that, it has the role of faculty and staff participation by engaging faculty and staff in developing and implementing of quality assurance processes and ensuring that they are aligned with institutional goals
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Role of External Quality Assurance

Figure 1 The Responses of Lecturers on the Role of External Quality Assurance (EQA)



The researchers asked respondents a question in order to find out the reasons behind IQA and EQA as well as its outcome. The answers are reflected in the following responses;

Reasons for Internal Quality Assurance

Lecturer '1' stated that the reason for internal quality assurance is for maintaining and improving the quality of education within the institution itself.

Lecturer '2' view was that "It helps ensure that the institution meets its own standards and goals.

Lecturer '3' said that it helps in formulating quality assurance policies that define quality standards and procedures. For instance, due to observing internal quality assurance processes the university has formulated policies for academic, research, ethics and many more and live according to them and it has helped the university in achieved quality in these areas.

Lecturer '4' narrated that, "The reason behind internal quality assurance is to promote quality through mechanisms of internal review such as regular reviews of academic programs, departments, and administrative functions through meetings.

Lecturer '5' reported that, the reason for internal quality assurance was for the promotion of self-assessment which including activities such as institutions conducting self-assessments to evaluate their performance with the ultimate reason of identifying areas for improvement.

Lecturer '6' stated that,

"The reason for internal quality assurance under quality assurance units such as quality audit management Unit, quality academic unit, quality program accreditation unit and quality improvement unit as dedicated units or committees is to make them be responsible for developing and implementing quality assurance policies and procedures".

Lecturer '7' echoed that, "The reason for internal quality assurance is to promote the aspect of feedback through feedback systems of gathering feedback from students, faculty, and staff to make continuous improvements".

Lecturer ‘8’ mentioned that “The internal quality assurance brings about the benefits of improved standards through regular monitoring and assessment resulting into enhanced educational standards”.

Lecturer ‘9’ pointed out that, internal quality assurance is important because it promotes the aspect of continuous improvement because it provides a framework for ongoing development and refinement of academic programs”.

Lecturer ‘10’ reported that, Internal quality assurance enhances accountability it makes the institutions to be held accountable for their internal quality metrics and goals.

Lecturer ‘9’ stated that the reason for internal quality assurance is to foster a culture of continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement. It also uses internal reporting mechanisms to track progress and outcomes.

Reasons for External Quality Assurance

The reasons for External Quality Assurance were reported by lecturers see the responses in Table 2.

Table 2 Lecturers Responses Concerning the Reasons for External Quality Assurance

Respondents	Responses
Lecturer ‘1’	reported that “The reasons for external quality assurance (EQA) is to ensure that institutions meet national or international standards by doing activities such as assessments and evaluations as conducted by external bodies.
Lecturer ‘2’	gave the following reason of external quality assurance which was to accredit using the mechanisms of accreditation through external agencies evaluation and accrediting institutions or specific programs based on predefined criteria.
Lecturer ‘3’	reported that, the reasons for external assurance is to assess compliance with standards and regulations through the process of conducting external auditing.
Lecturer ‘4’	reported the reasons for external quality assurance is for strengthening peer review using external experts review and provide feedback on academic programs and institutional practices.
Lecturer ‘5’	pointed out that the reason for external quality assurance is its benefits of objective evaluation because it provides an unbiased assessment of quality based on external criteria.
Lecturer ‘6’	stated that “Accreditation and positive evaluations enhances the institution’s reputation and attractiveness to clients as one of the reasons for external quality assurance. There is institutional improvement through external reviews and accreditation processes which drive significant improvements in institutional practices and outcomes. Student and employer confidence is achieved through accreditation and positive external evaluations and in return it enhances student and employer confidence in the quality of education being offered. For instance it resulted in our university courses to be accredited by ZAQUA, it is continuously assessed, clients have been attracted and ranked among the top ten universities in the country”.
Lecturer ‘7’	reported that, institutions with strong external quality assessments may receive more funding and support from government and private sources”.
Lecturer ‘8’	pointed out the reason for external quality assurance and this is for ranking and benchmarking of institutions from lowest to the highest such as tier 4 to 1 in that order in which 4 is the lowest and 1 being the highest by higher education authority, through comparing of institutions against others through rankings or benchmarking exercises and reported that “Our university have been awarded the last tier ”.
Lecturer ‘9’	point out that it’s for benchmarking which helps institutions compare their performance with peers and adopt best practices
Lecturer ‘10’	pointed out that, “External quality assurance is important because it provides an objective assessment that can drive strategic enhancements and public trust after regular monitoring and evaluation of academic programs, administrative processes, and student services.

Interplay between internal and external assurance

The researchers asked respondents about the benefits of interplay between internal and external assurance, their answers were reflected in the responses they provided in Table 3.

Table 3 Responses from Lecturers Concerning Interplay between internal and external quality assurance

Lecturer '1'	echoed that the interplay ensures quality assessment framework, accountability, transparency and academic excellence.
Lecturer '2'	view was that, the interplay between internal and external quality assurance is vital for the holistic development of higher education institutions.
Lecturer '3'	stated that the integration of both quality assurance approaches is imperative for sustaining high educational quality, fostering innovation, and meeting the evolving demands of the global education landscape.
Lecturer '4'	stated that while internal mechanisms or roles cultivate a proactive and improvement-oriented culture within institutions, external mechanisms or roles provide the necessary validation and benchmarking against global standards from international organizations entities or agencies like the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) or the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Accreditation Bodies: Organizations such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) or the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). National Agencies: Government or regional bodies responsible for overseeing educational standards and quality
Lecturer '5'	said that, the dual approach ensures that institutions not only meet their internal goals but also align with external expectations and best practices. For example, we are effective in achieving and sustaining high-quality education
Lecturer '6'	stated that "Integration of internal and external quality assurance promote alignment this is where institutions strive to align their internal quality assurance practices with external standards to ensure coherence and effectiveness
Lecturer '7'	stated that it encourages continuous feedback loop and this is the feedback from external evaluations that can inform internal quality improvement processes.
Lecturer '10'	mentioned that, holistic approach of combining internal and external quality assurance is important because it provides a comprehensive view of institutional quality and supports overall enhancement.

The researchers administered a question of finding out the best practice in line with internal and external quality assurance the responses were as follows;

Best Practice

The empirical finding was that by effectively implementing best practice for both internal and external quality assurance, higher learning institutions can ensure high educational standards, foster continuous improvement, and meet the evolving needs of students and society and public trust as reflected from respondents;

Lecturer '1' stated that one of the best practices for integration is alignment of internal quality assurance policies with external standards and requirements to create a cohesive approach.

Lecturer '2' stated that one of the best practice is that of "Maintaining open communication between internal quality assurance units and external reviewers to ensure consistency and clarity".

Lecturer '3' reported that continuous communication is a best practice this is the establishment of regular communication channels between internal quality assurance teams and external evaluators to address issues and share insights.

Lecturer '4' stated that unified reporting is a best practice this is the development of unified reporting systems that incorporate both internal and external quality metrics for comprehensive evaluation.

Lecturer ‘5’ echoed that, “Alignment of goals is a best practice of ensuring that internal quality assurance processes are designed to meet external standards and accreditation requirements.

Lecturer ‘6’ stated that, “Feedback mechanisms of utilizing feedback from external evaluations to drive internal improvements and align practices is one of the best practices”.

Lecturer ‘7’ reported that, adopting a culture of continuous improvement where feedback from both internal and external sources is used to enhance quality is a best practice.

Lecturer ‘8’ echoed that,

“Stakeholder engagement of involving students, faculty, and other stakeholders in quality assurance processes to ensure comprehensive and inclusive evaluations is a best practice. In addition the other best practice is that of ensuring transparency in quality assurance processes, findings, and actions taken to foster trust and accountability”.

Lecturer ‘9’ report that,

“Data-driven decision making of utilizing data analytics to inform quality assurance practices and decision-making is the best practice of modern trend in this era of technology. Utilizing learning analytics to monitor student performance, identify trends, and make data-informed decisions is also a best practice. Implementing Artificial Intelligence tools for automating quality assurance processes, analyzing data, and providing predictive insights is a best practice”.

Lecturer ‘10’ pointed out that,

“Technological integration of implementing technology solutions for monitoring and evaluating quality, such as learning management systems and digital assessment tools is the best practice. Equally global standards or adapting to global quality standards and practices to enhance international recognition and collaboration is the best practice”.

Challenges in line with internal and external quality assurance and how they can be addressed

The researchers posed a question of finding out the challenges in line with internal and external quality assurance and how they can be addressed the responses were as shown in Table 4.

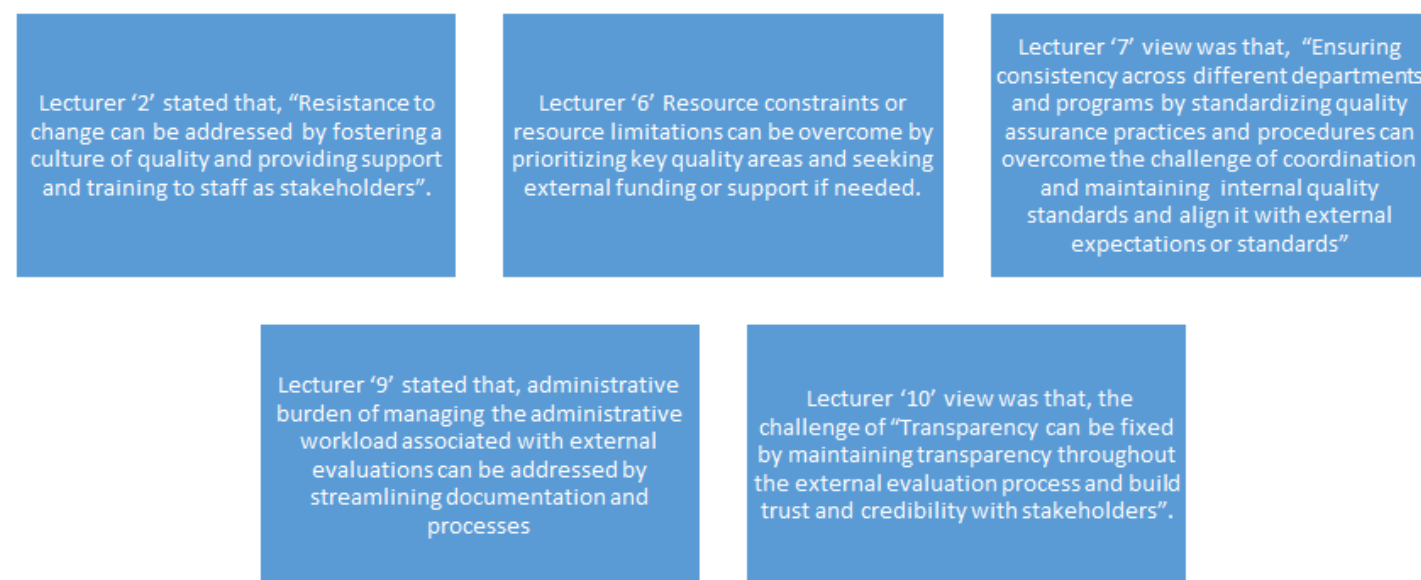
Table 4 Responses from Lecturers Concerning the Challenges in line with Internal and External Quality Assurance

Lecturer ‘1’ stated that there is a challenge encountered such as resource intensive this where both internal and external quality assurance processes can be requiring time and financial investment.	Lecturer ‘5’ reported the challenge of achieving the required careful coordination of internal and external processes. Lecturer ‘8’ reported the challenge of administrative burden of managing the administrative workload associated with external evaluations.
Lecturer ‘3’ said that there is challenge of resistance to change for instance, institutions may face resistance to changes recommended through quality assurance processes. For instance, some lecturers were resistant to change.	Lecturer ‘6’ pointed out the challenge of alignment of standards or ensuring that external standards align with institutional goals and context by engaging in dialogue with accrediting bodies and adapting practices as needed.
Lecturer ‘4’ stated that, there is a challenge of not maintaining internal quality standards and align it with external expectations.	Lecturer ‘10’ pointed out the challenge of “Maintaining integrity throughout the external evaluation process to build trust and credibility with stakeholders. For instance come staff were lacking integrity”.

Responses from Lecturers Concerning Addressing of challenges in line with Internal and External Quality Assurance

The researchers administered the question to lecturers concerning how to address the challenges in line with Internal and External Quality Assurance. Their responses are reflected in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Responses from Lecturers Concerning Addressing of challenges in line with Internal and External Quality Assurance



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of this study is based the findings of this study objective of exploring the roles and reasons of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in higher learning institutions.

Meaning of internal and external quality assurance

The study began by understanding the meaning of internal and external quality assurance. It was found that internal quality assurance is a process of monitoring, assessment and improving educational offerings within the institutions. According to [16], internal quality assurance mechanisms include self-evaluations, internal audits, and continuous feedback loops aimed at fostering a culture of quality within institutions. The two study findings were similar in that the processes or mechanisms discovered aimed at improving quality in higher institutions.

External quality assurance was understood to be the process of evaluation of an institutional quality standard by external bodies at national and regional level. The processes involve preparations, reports, follow ups, accreditation, ranking and benchmarking. The finding of this study is similar to what was revealed by [7] who emphasize that external evaluations provide an independent assessment of an institution's quality, which can enhance public trust and ensure accountability.

Basing on this finding which focused on meaning of internal and external quality assurance the researchers voice was that the two processes were understood by participants and that they need to be taken seriously because they are important for the realization of quality in educational institutions.

Roles of internal and external quality assurance

This study discovered the following roles; under internal quality assurance the roles were that of self-regulation, assessment, internal review and development of quality culture among staff and students, continuous improvement, curriculum review, promoting ownership among institution members, providing feedback, faculty development, maintenance of academic standards, involving stakeholders, development of

plans such as strategic plan, align quality assurance with institutional goal, national and international standards. The findings of this study was partially similar to the finding of [6], who stated that internal QA involves systematic approaches to maintain and improve educational quality by engaging stakeholders in regular assessments and reviews. This is because the current study found more roles of internal quality assurance as compared to [6].

The researchers understanding or voice was that the roles of internal quality assurance systems are vital for institutions to ensure that they meet their educational goals and standards and that the university under this study implemented these roles comprehensively achieved significant improvements in educational outcomes and operational efficiency of having a steady progress of a good number of doctor of philosophy among lecturers who have graduated and those who are still studying and graduating.

The discovered roles of external quality assurance were that of evaluation by external bodies, of ensuring that learning institutions adherence to national and international standards, accreditation of institutional programs, auditing, external review, regulatory compliance, benchmarking against global standards, promotion of public assurance and accountability. The study by [5] discovered that accreditation processes help institutions benchmark against national and international standards as compared to the current study were more roles were unveiled.

The empirical findings on roles of external quality assurance according to the researchers' voice was that the current study have revealed a lot of role crucial to the realization of external quality at the study site university that was implemented and significantly impacted institutional reputation and credibility such as reaching last level of tier.

Reasons for internal and external quality assurance

The study revealed that, the reasons for internal quality assurance were; to maintain and improve the quality of education in institutions of learning through internal review, institutions to meet its own goals and standards, for defining procedures and formulation of quality policy, for promoting self-assessment, evaluate performance, continuous improvement of its quality and standards through monitoring, promote feedback and stakeholder engagement and for institutions to be accountable. The findings of this study was not similar to the finding of [6], who stated that internal QA involves systematic approaches to maintain and improve educational quality by engaging stakeholders in regular assessments and reviews. This is because the current study focused on reasons behind internal quality assurance while [6] focused on what is involved during the process of internal quality assurance.

The discoveries of this study on reasons for internal quality assurance according to the researchers' voice or point of view is that, these reasons might lead the ultimate aim of realizing quality in higher educational institutions. For instance, due to observing internal quality assurance processes the university has formulated policies for academic, research, ethics and many more and live according to them and it has helped the university in achieved quality in these areas.

This study unveiled the reasons for external quality assurance and these were; to ensure that institutions meet the national and international standards, to accredit, to promotion of assessment compliance with the standards through audit, to strengthen peer review, for the benefit of unbiased assessment, for enhancing reputation of learning institutions and make them be attracted to clients, for institutional improvement, for students, staff and employer confidence in the service being provided, for ranking and benchmarking of learning institutions. In a similar manner on some areas [10] provide a comparative analysis of external quality assurance practices across different countries, highlighting the benefits of benchmarking and sharing best practices. Their study demonstrates that external quality assurance can drive institutions to align with international standards and adopt innovative practices. Nevertheless, the current study highlighted a number of reasons for conducting external quality assurance than the earlier research.

The researchers were strongly in support of the findings that were revealed under reasons for external quality assurance because of the numerous benefits that would be realized by the higher education institutions as

mentioned above. For instance, it resulted in the study site university courses to be accredited by ZAQUA, it is continuously assessed, clients have been attracted and ranked among the top ten universities in the country.

Interplay between internal and external quality assurance

The study discovered that, interplay ensure quality assessment, accountability, transparency and academic excellence, holistic development, higher education quality, fostering of innovations, meeting of global standards, objective assessment that can drive strategic enhancements and public trust, validation and benchmarking, institution alignment with expectations and best practice, promotion of culture of continuous improvement and feedback and provision of comprehensive view of instructional quality. The findings of this are similar to the findings of [11] who argue that an integrated approach, combining both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms is essential for comprehensive quality management in higher education. Their study suggests that such an approach ensures continuous improvement and sustained quality enhancement. They are similar because the current study focused on interplay ensuring quality in institutions while the study by [11] focused on interplay ensuring quality and being essential for realization of quality.

The researchers voice was that; the interplay is essential for realization of quality as pointed out by the two studies. This might be due to institutions aligning their internal quality assurance processes with external standards more effectively in achieving and sustaining high-quality education like what was done at the study site university.

Best practice of internal and external quality assurance

This study brought out the following best practice of internal and external quality assurance; aligning internal with external quality assurance, aligning practice to quality assurance, maintaining open communication between quality assurance units and external reviewers, development of unified reporting system, stakeholder engagement, transparency of quality assurance processes, findings and action taking and use of modern technology solutions to monitor and evaluate quality. The findings of this study was partially in line with the study findings by [3] who found that adopting best practices such as unified reporting systems and stakeholder involvement can enhance the effectiveness of both internal and external quality assurance processes. This is because the current study listed out many best practices while the study by [3] focused on two best practices of reporting systems and stakeholder involvement only.

Challenges of internal and external quality assurance and the solutions

The study found the following challenges, intensive resources such as finances and time, resistance to change, alignment of internal with external quality assurance, lack of coordination of internal with external quality assurance, administrative burden. The finding of this study is similar to the finding of [12] who discovered that the common challenges include resistance to change and resource constraints and that institutions often struggle with implementing quality assurance processes consistently across different departments. However, this current study found more challenges in addition to what was discovered by [12].

Basing on this the challenges found through empirical studies the researchers voice is in strongly in agreement that institutions often struggle with implementing quality assurance processes consistently across different departments however, higher education institutions need to address these challenges using the solutions discovered in this study as presented below.

The solutions discovered by this study were as follows the challenge of intensive resource can be addressed by identifying key areas for internal and external quality assurance and source for funds from government and private sector. The challenge of resistance to change can be fixed through support and training of the stakeholders. The challenge of alignment can be addressed by aligning internal and external quality assurance with expected standards. The challenge of administrative burden can be addressed through streamlining documentation and processes. Overcoming the challenge of integrity among the staff can be done through consultancy with the departments in the institutions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it was evident from the findings that internal quality and external quality assurance are processes, and have roles, reasons for implanting them, interplay and best practice are essential for the realization of quality in higher learning institutions as pointed out in this study. The study also established these challenges which are being experienced during the course of implementing internal quality and external quality assurance processes and that they need to be addressed in order to achieve quality holistically in educational institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations from this study are;

1. Key areas for internal and external quality assurance and sourcing for funds from government and private sector need to be done by the university management.
2. Through orientation support and short term training of lecturers by the university, resistance to change can be addressed.
3. Aligning internal and external quality assurance with expected standards by the school deans is needed.
4. Through advising all lecturers to do their part in terms of internal and external quality as the management are doing their part can be done by the school dean.
5. The staff integrity in terms of internal and external quality assurance can be achieved through consultation with the departmental heads in the institutions.

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