

IIEP-UNESCO Research
Project

How does the context influence IQA? A focus on factors that condition the variations of IQA



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IIEP research on IQA

Why an IIEP research on internal quality assurance ?

- IQA has become a global reform trend in HE, with much experimentation and variation worldwide
 - IQA developed in response to EQA
 - National reforms that make IQA compulsory
 - Universities prepare for “international” accreditations
- The influence of context widely under-researched from an empirical point of view
- Less attention to evidence on IQA from universities in developing (southern) countries.



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Objectives of IIEP research on internal quality assurance

- Identify main trends internationally in the orientation, functioning, drivers, and obstacles to internal quality assurance;
- Illustrate approaches and options in IQA, considered as effective practices and good principles, in a given context;
- Demonstrate the effects of IQA with regard to the teaching and learning process, the employability of graduates and the effectiveness of management; and
- Identify internal and external factors that condition the effective functioning of IQA in universities.



Selection of eight case universities



Research methodology for case studies

- Integrated qualitative and quantitative design
 - Semi-structured interviews with institutional key actors
 - Central and middle level academic and administrative decision-makers
 - Focus group discussions
 - Head of departments with selected programme directors
 - Students
 - Online surveys of academic and administrative staff on perceptions of the local IQA system, their effects and conditioning factors





Presenting variation

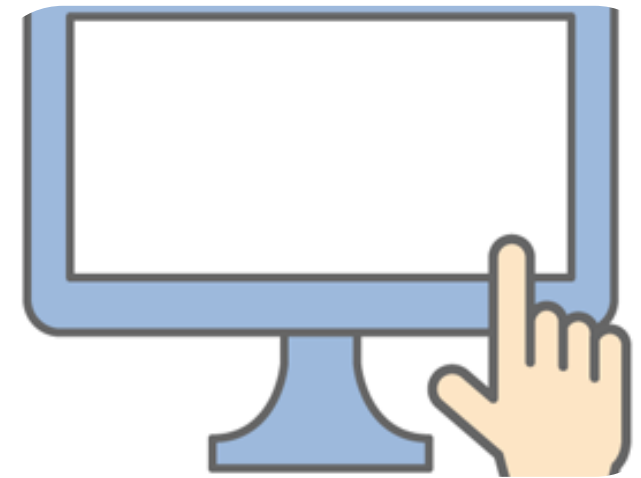
Variation in IQA



**Purpose and
focus**

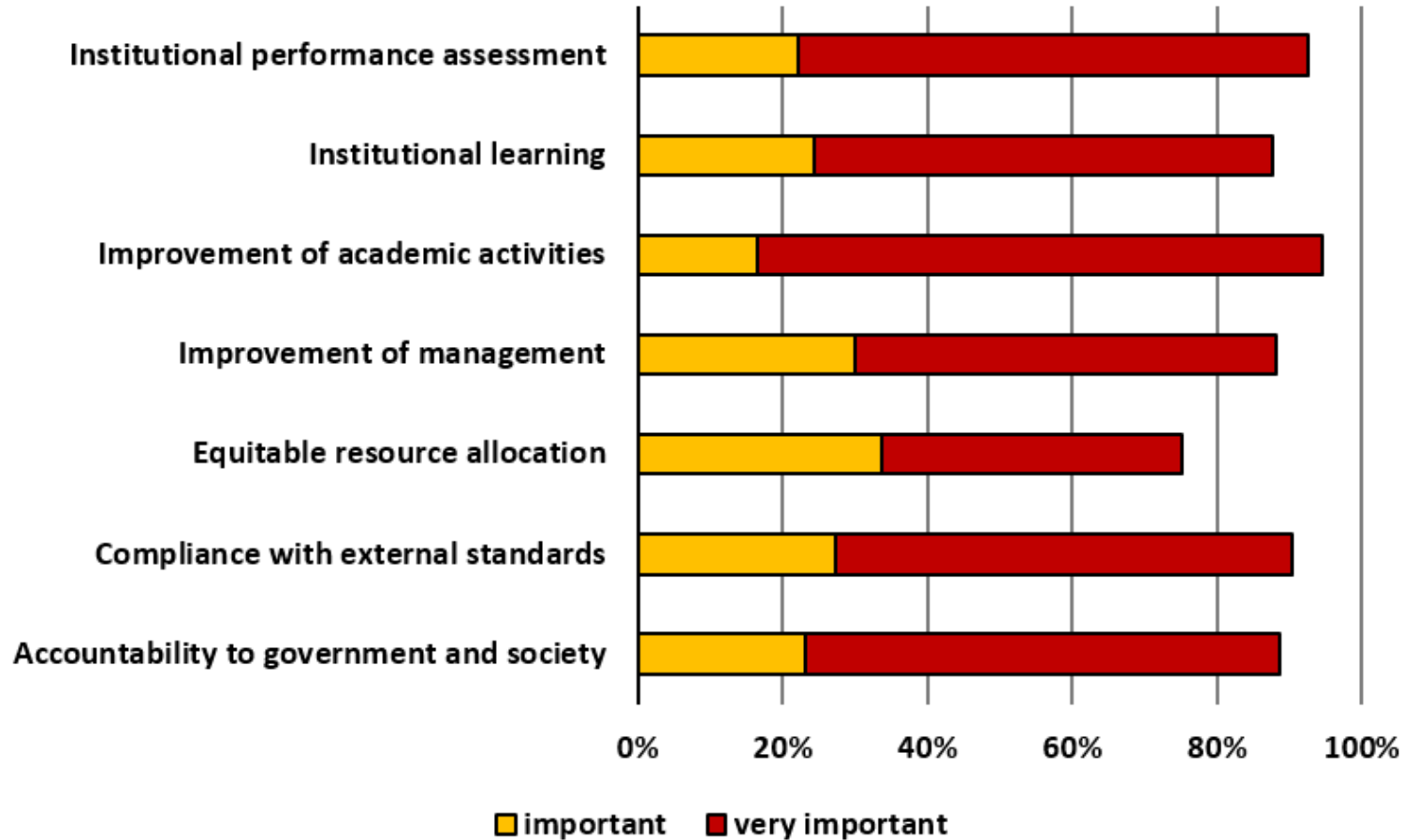


**Level of
formalization**



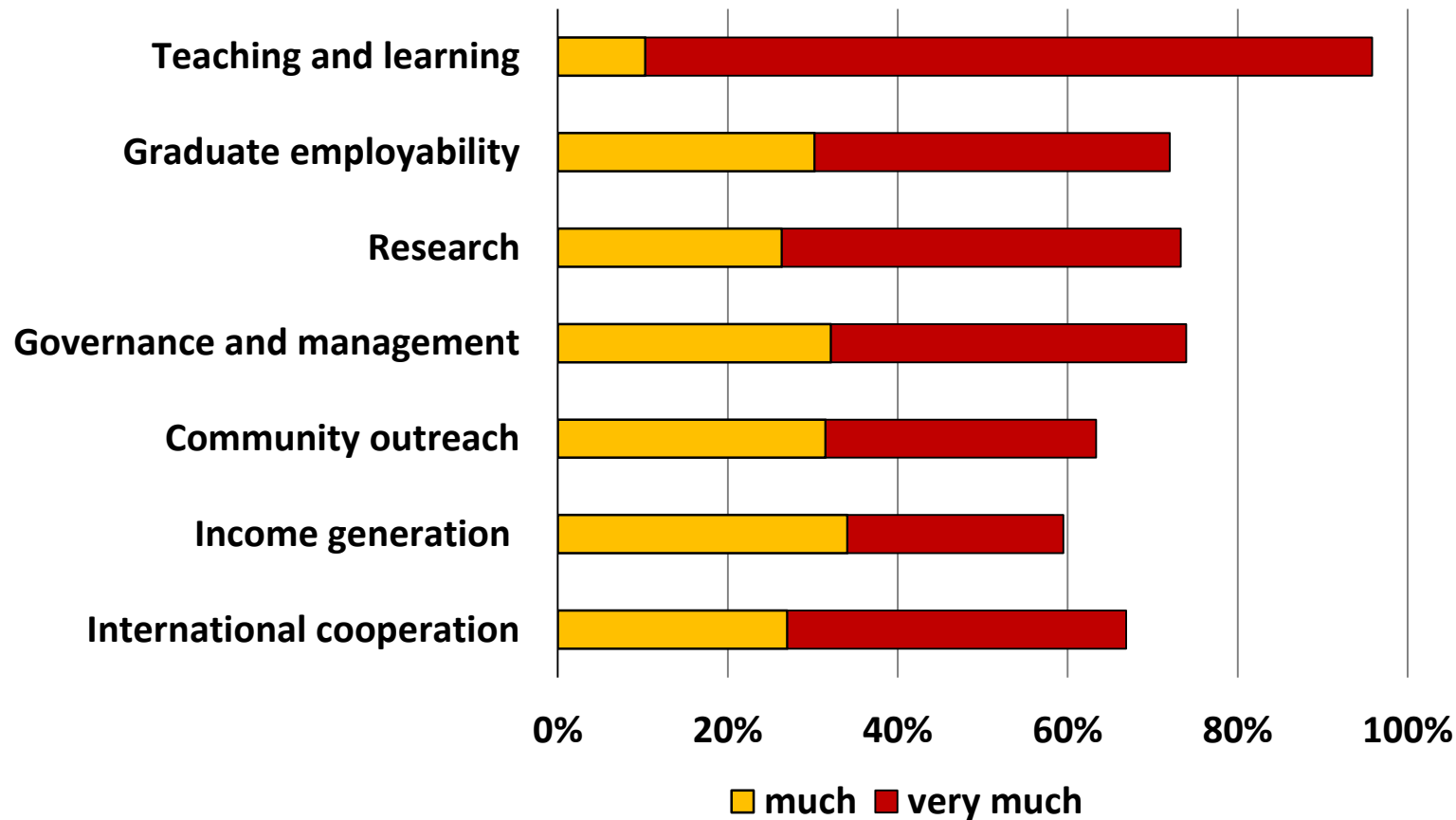
**Use of
information**

Varying purposes of IQA



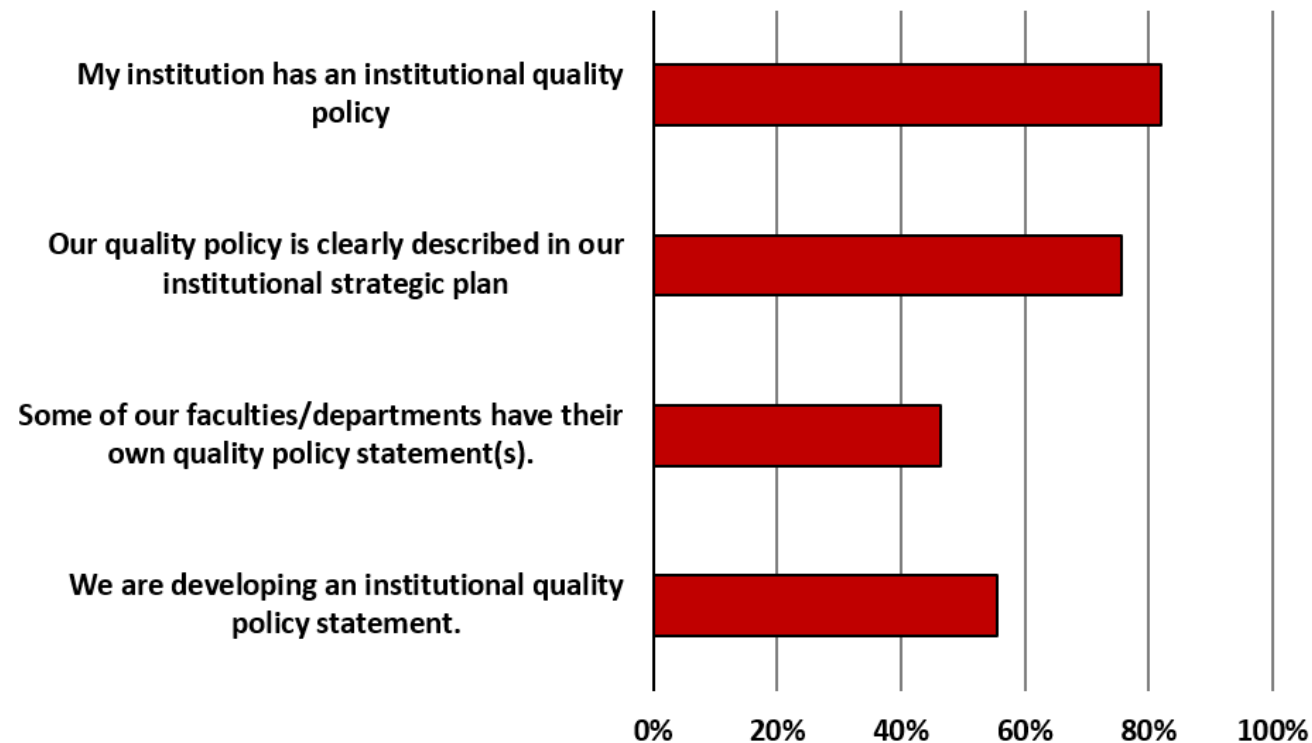
While most goals are recognized as important, some like equitable resource allocation is somewhat less. **Both internally and externally driven goals are equally important.**

Variation in the focus



The focus of IQA seems varying from teaching and learning to employability to management. **The varying focus of IQA can be explained by the interplay of external and internal factors.**

Variation in formalization : Quality Policy



While **institutional quality policy is largely present**, the quality policy at a more decentralized level – at faculty level – is less frequent.

Variation in staff awareness of quality policy

Yes, this document exists and is useful for my work	Academic staff		Administrative staff	
	AIUB	71.4%	94%	
	DU	76.7%	73.3%	
	UDE	13%	23.5%	
	UFS	35.2%	28.7%	
	UoB	54.5%	31%	
	UT	52%	56%	
	WU	68%	72%	
	XMU	55.2%	63.4%	

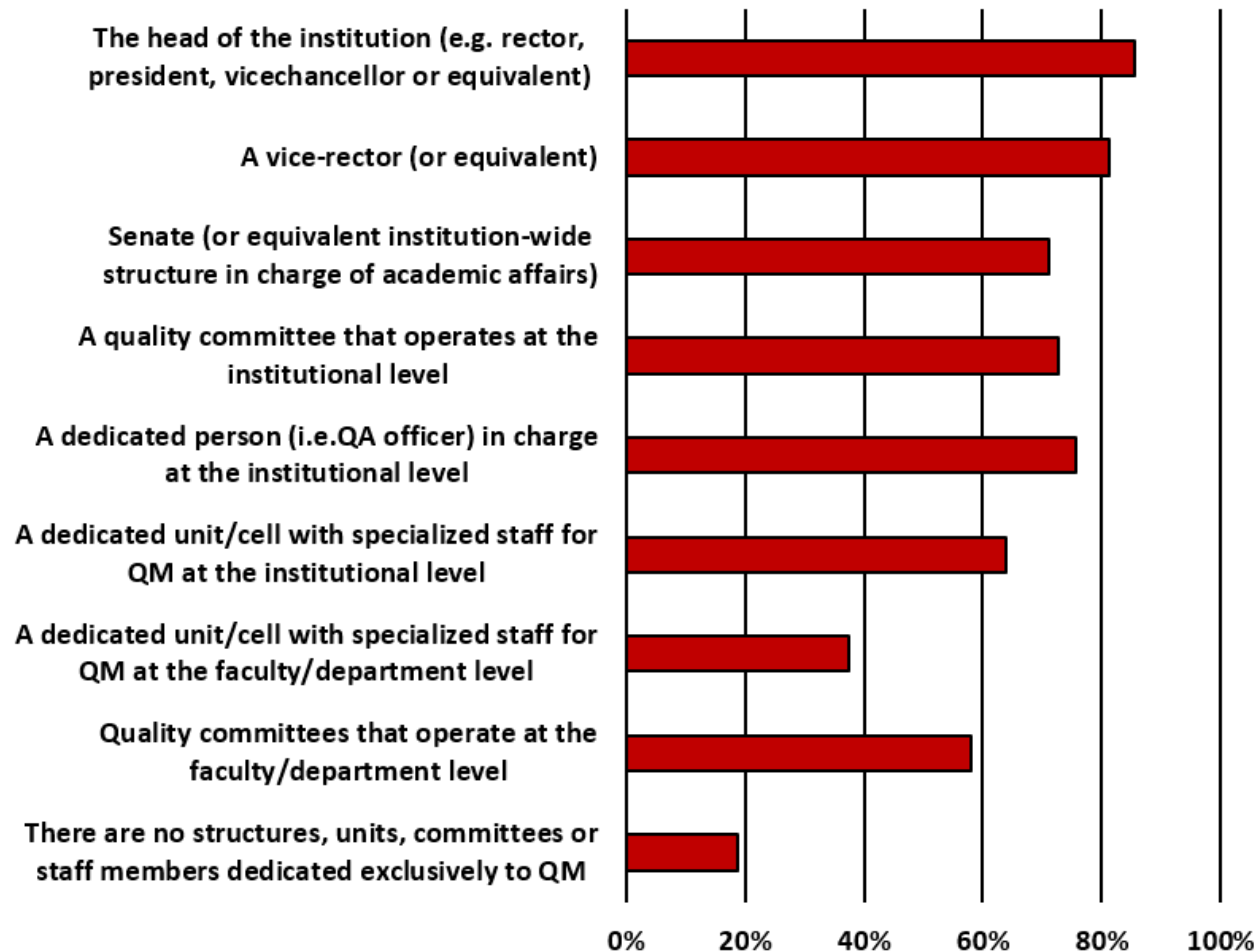
Although a majority of staff members at most of the case universities were aware of the existence of the quality policy and thought that they were useful, **it was found that the content of quality policies and manuals varied across universities.**

Variation in the format of the quality policy

- What is a quality policy?
 - **Master Plan for reform** shows the University's commitment to quality (XMU)
 - **Strategic development plan** of the university (WU)
 - **Quality enhancement framework**, used as a guiding document for academics to approach quality based on a critical enquiry (UFS)



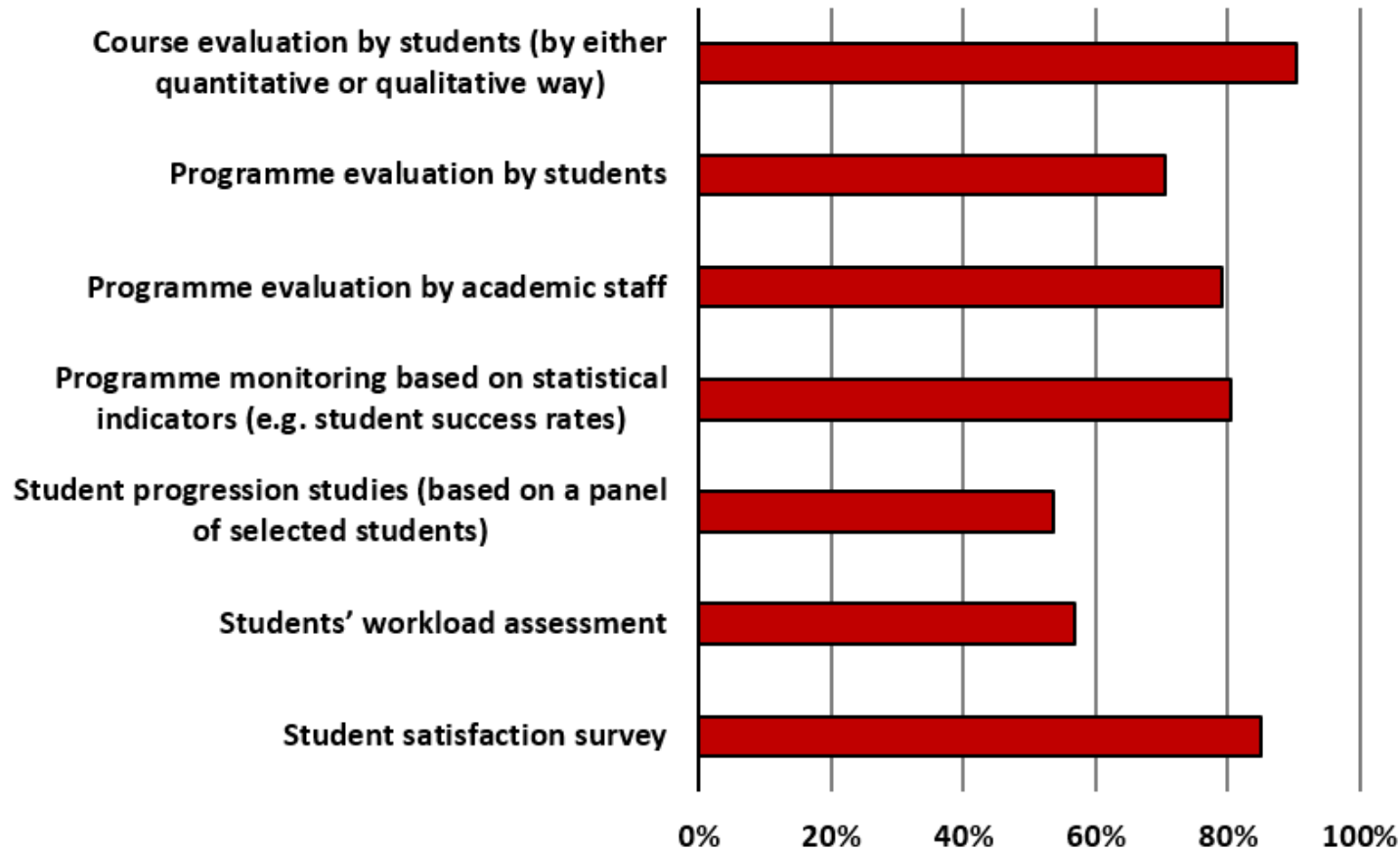
Variation in formalization: Structures



Heads of institutions (rector and vice-rector) play an important role in leading IQA.

Dedicated support structures with specialized staff for IQA are less present: 64% at institutional level while only 37% at departmental or faculty level.

Variation in tools used for enhancement of T/L



Course evaluation (90%) is the most commonly used tool followed by student satisfaction survey (85%).

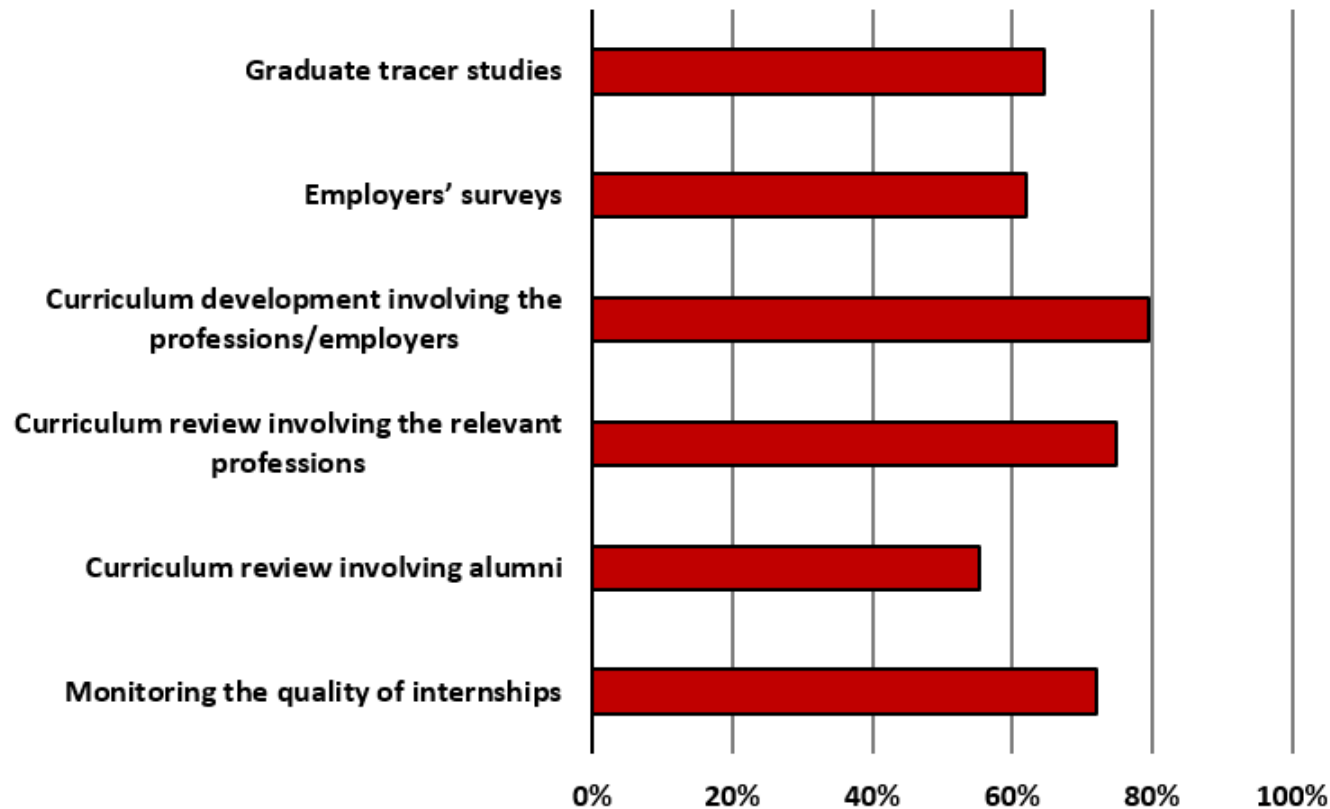
Use of students' workload assessment (57%) and student progression studies (54%) requires extensive use of both technical and human resource. Hence, institutions constrained in these resources will find it harder to implement them.

Variation in tools: Focus on course evaluation

- Variations in terms of objectives and modalities of course evaluation:
 - Course evaluations with a particular focus on **teachers and their teaching performance** (XMU)
 - **A qualitative course evaluation** via student representatives in addition to student surveys (UDE)
 - Course evaluations by **feedbacks** gathered through surveys, group discussions, interviews, and trend reviews from a diversity of stakeholders (AIUB)



Variation in the focus on graduate employability

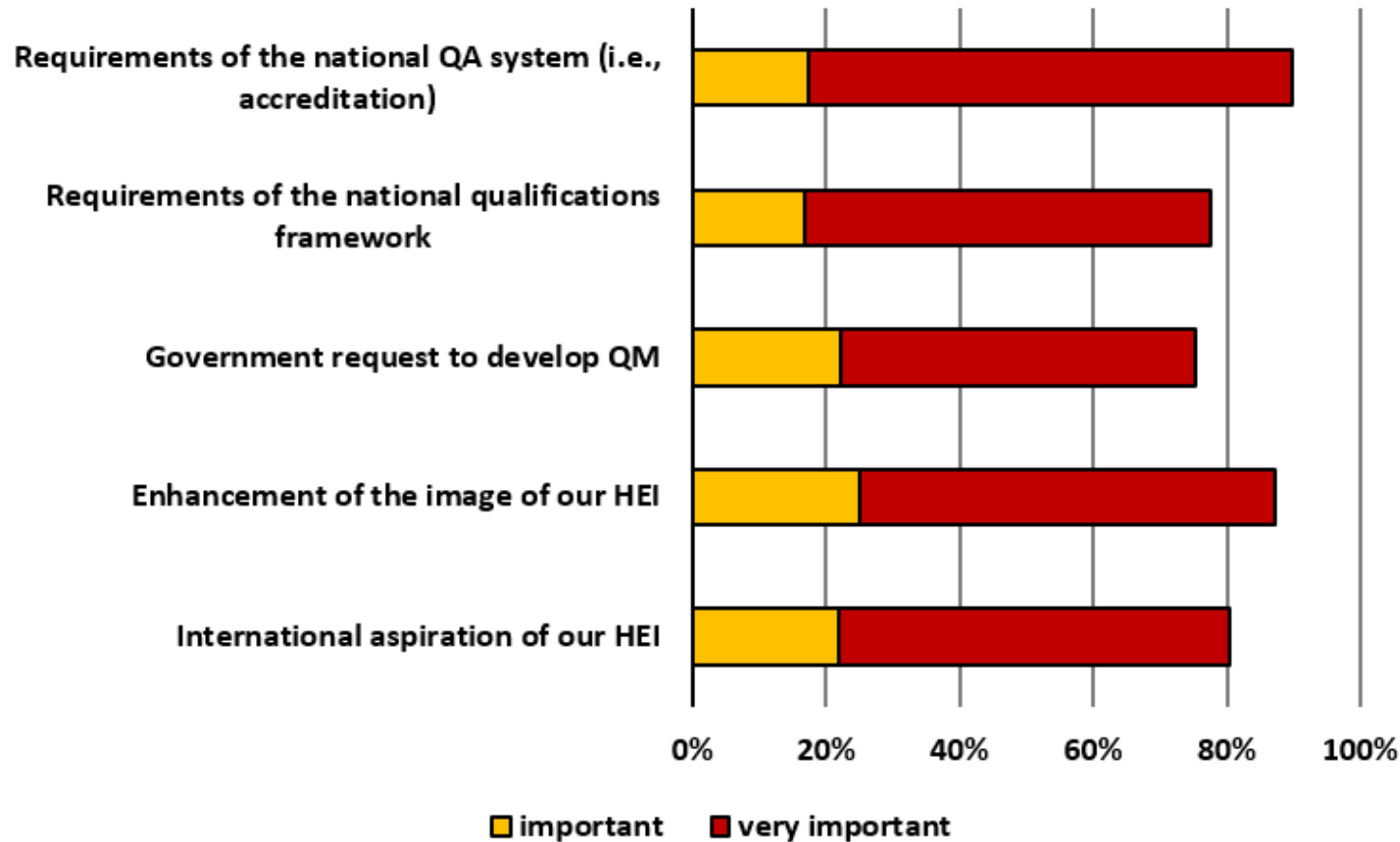


IQA instruments to support employability are somewhat less frequent. Curriculum development involving professionals (79%) followed by curriculum review (75%), monitoring the quality of internships (72%) are the more popular tools to enhance graduate employability.



Factors that condition the variations of IQA

External drivers in development of internal quality assurance



Requirements of the national QA system forms the most important motive (89%) for the development of QA, followed closely by **enhancement of self-image** (87%).

However, the importance of respective factors is varying to a greater extent, depending on the context.

External factors (1): National or regional policy on higher education

- Regional integration reform in Europe and Africa
 - Bologna Process in Europe (UDE, WU)
 - Also conditions whether graduate employability is a policy focus (DU, AIUB)
- Development-oriented national policy on higher education
 - Transformation agenda in South Africa in the post-apartheid period (UFS)
 - Excellence initiatives in China (XMU)
 - World Bank funded *Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project* (AIUB)
 - Other development cooperation (IUCEA and DAAD)



External factors (2): National quality assurance framework

- Austrian University Act (2002) requires universities to implement QM system (WU), institutional quality audit (since 2008)
- From programme to system accreditation since 2008 (UDE)
- Institutional reviews and preparation for NQF (UFS, UoB)
- Five yearly conformance evaluation conducted by the **Higher Education Evaluation Centre** since 2012, Chinese universities have been required to submit annual reports on the quality of undergraduate teaching (XMU);
- Voluntary institutional accreditation in Chile (UT)
- “International” programme accreditations (AIUB, WU, XMU, UoB)



Internal factors (1): Level of decentralization

- Distribution of responsibilities for IQA depends on the level of decentralization of HEI, in general (in UoB – IQA rather centralized, in UDE – high level of decentralization)
- Unit autonomy is associated with factors positively conditioning IQA at the university where autonomy is seen as an organizing principle of university and a core of academic value.
 - “In general, I can imagine democratic, pluralistic circumstances, which are balanced in terms of power, as being factors which could contribute to a well-functioning QA system” (Interview III, governing board at UDE);
 - “The autonomy for colleges is very important; it gives us more flexibility and choice” (dean of faculty, XMU).



Internal factors (2): Perceptions on importance of financial incentives

- The development of IQA was part of an externally funded project (Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project in Bangladesh, funded by the World Bank), IQA was not perceived as part of the functions and regular duties of academic staff, hence their higher request for additional rewards in return for the involvement in IQA (AIUB).
- Since the institutional culture has encouraged actors at every level to engage with quality improvement, academic staff regarded incentives and rewards as largely irrelevant to the success of IQA (WU).



Internal factors (3): Quality and quantity of human resources for IQA

- Similar to financial incentives, there seems to be a higher demand for human resources among many staff members at universities where IQA is not perceived as part of the functions and regular duties of academic staff.
 - University authorities as well as individual staff members said that training personnel was a key factor in implementing the internal quality assurance system (UT).
 - All of those interviewed – including staff from all three faculties as well as students – reported that they felt heavily burdened by IQA activities due to the lack of human resources at the university (UFS).



Internal factors (4): Active stakeholder participation

- Depending on the context, IQA places different importance on stakeholders and their views
 - **Support by teachers:** XMU, with a heavy emphasis on teaching quality in IQA, placed a high importance on teachers in IQA (teacher supervision and guidance).
 - **Involvement of students:** WU and UDE strongly value the involvement of students.
 - **Involvement of graduates and employers:** UoB, programme advisory committees are composed of employers and alumni



Internal factors (4): Information system

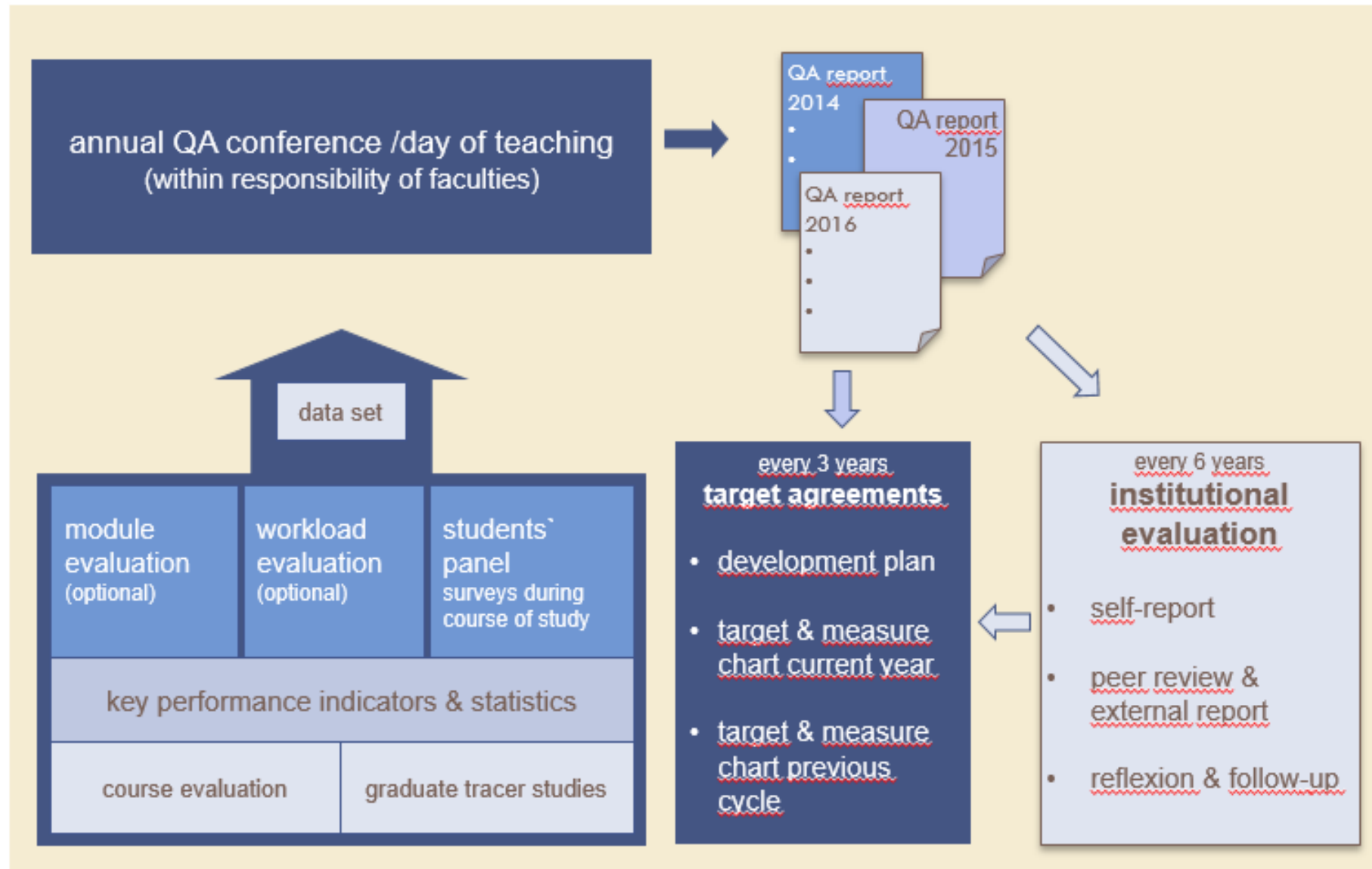
- Information systems recognized as a crucial success factor for a well functioning IQA
- National reporting requirements and IQA itself boost institutional information systems
- But, information systems remain a challenge even in resourceful contexts.
 - Despite the existence of the online assessment information management system, the dissemination of IQA data was found to be problematic by university leaders (UoB).
 - A high level of centralization of access to data and information as well as a lack of integration of database slowed down processes and impeded the development of effective management of IQA (XMU).
 - Organizing dialogue on quality (UDE, WU)
- In contexts, where analytical sophistication is a problem, informal mechanisms to access information are used



Internal factors (5) « Closing the loop » procedures

- Different types of closing the loop procedures
 - Teaching days/ quality conference
 - Discussions on survey results in the Office of the Vice rector (XMU)
 - Unit evaluation and planning (target level agreements)
- Closing the loop procedures depend on the scope of IQA (only focused on T/L and or management)
- Modalities for IQA depend on the level of decentralization
- Link of IQA with organizational culture seems to be very important, yet underresearched

- Available information conditions “quality dialogue”





Conclusions

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- Variations in understanding and implementation of IQA across contexts
- Importance of different conditioning factors is varying to a greater extent, depending on the context.
- Role of the national policy context
- Role of external quality assurance
- Level of decentralization, openness and





Thank you!

Any questions?

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Questions for discussion

- What do you think are the most important contextual elements that determine the functioning of IQA ?
- How do you think do they condition the functioning of IQA at your university ?
- How would you like your national context to support you in the functioning of you IQA ?