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Short bio:

Christopher Bland is the Head of Accreditation and Consultancy at the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) with a focus on international projects. He has worked with many institutions in the areas of quality assurance, course design and strategic development. He has helped develop quality assurance systems and designed accreditation systems.

He is a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society. Prior to joining the QAA he was the Registrar at The Knowledge Hub Universities in Cairo, Egypt. In this senior role he was responsible for the team looking after student records, quality assurance processes and regulatory matters. He helped train and developed colleagues' understanding of the UK QA system.

He has also been the Group Director of Quality Assurance at Coventry University. He was responsible for the quality assurance activities and course approval processes across the university group and for courses taught at international collaborative partners.

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Eduardo Ramos is Director of International & Professional Services at QAA Services and is responsible for the portfolio of QAA's international services, including international membership services, accreditation, consultancy and QE-TNE (quality evaluation and enhancement of UK transnational education). He leads on international partnership building, ensuring the Agency continues to work with governments, agencies and institutions globally to benefit UK higher education and its international reputation.

Prior to this role, Eduardo worked in education internationalisation for Universities UK, St George's Hospital Medical School, Audencia Business School, and ICEX-Invest in Spain. He holds degrees from the Autonomous University of Madrid and University College London and is fluent in English, Spanish and French.

Proposal

Title: Case Study Examples of Undertaking Higher Education Quality Reviews in West Africa

Abstract

The paper describes the work of the UK Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) International Quality Reviews (IQR) in universities within West Africa. This work was carried out in support of the World Bank's capacity building project 'Africa Higher Education Centres of Excellence (ACE)'. Part of the ACE project supplies funding to institutions to support and encourage them to seek external international accreditation.

Under ACE the QAA has conducted accreditation work, based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), in Nigeria, Lagos, Ghana, Benin and Cote d'Ivoire. Our IQR process has several stages where the institution is encouraged to undertake a gap analysis on their processes against the ESG standards. After successful completion, the institution progresses to a full review of its quality assurance processes and documentation along with meetings with staff, students and stakeholders before being considered for accreditation.

The paper will also explore how ESG review can contribute to the achievement of the ACE project objectives of addressing specific regional development challenges and strengthening the capacities of universities to deliver high quality training and applied research. The paper's structure will describe:

- QAA's IQR accreditation process and its contribution to the ACE project.
- How this has assisted universities to create and develop policies and supply evidence of their implementation.
- Its contribution to providing institutions with a greater knowledge of international quality assurance systems.
- The added benefits of undergoing an external accreditation process
 - Supporting staff development
 - Intercultural interaction
 - Positive spinoff effects: talent retention and community development

World Bank's capacity building project 'Africa Higher Education Centres of Excellence (ACE)'

The Africa Higher Education Centres of Excellence (ACE) project is a World Bank initiative in collaboration with governments of participating countries to support Higher Education institutions in specialising in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, Environment, Agriculture, applied Social Science / Education and Health.

The first phase of the project (ACE I) was launched in 2014 with 22 centres in nine West and Central African countries; Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo (Association of African Universities: 2022). The main aims were to:

- Promote regional specialisation among participating universities in areas that address specific common regional development challenges
- Strengthen the capacities of these universities to deliver high quality training and applied research
- Meet the demand for skills required for Africa's development

The success of this led to the formation of a second phase (ACE II) which was launched in East and Southern Africa with 24 centres across Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

This large project has grown to provide many benefits in terms of the development of courses, teaching and learning, and the recognition of courses.

In May 2018, the governments of Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, Niger, Djibouti, Guinea, Togo, and The Gambia, with support from the World Bank and the French Development Agency, launched ACE Impact. ACE Impact is designed to further address the

regional development challenges in West and Central Africa through a focused programme of postgraduate education and applied research.

ACE has resulted in the expansion of postgraduate education with over 2000 PhD and 11000 MSc students enrolled in key priority sectors, Over 30 percent of the students are females, signalling the importance of increasing female representation within scientific fields. ACE has pushed the boundaries in terms of quality and relevance with over 60 programs achieving international accreditation, up from a baseline of 3 at the start of the project (Kyei, M: 2020).

Selected universities are allocated funds locally based on the needs of each ACE and the host country's priorities. It is a results-based project, in which funds are distributed to centres according to a set of Disbursement Linked Indicators (DLIs) and results (DLRs). The DLIs and DLRs are grouped into seven areas. DLI 7 includes a focus on Institutional Impact and global good practices for higher education. Within DLI 7, there is an expectation that ACE Impact institutions will pursue international institutional accreditation by the end of the ACE programme in 2024.

QAA's approach to supporting international accreditation.

On 13 April 2021, QAA started its involvement with the project with a webinar, attended by over 100 Vice Chancellors from African universities and leaders of ACE centres. The webinar provided information on the QAA's international accreditation services and how this could of benefit supporting the ACE project.

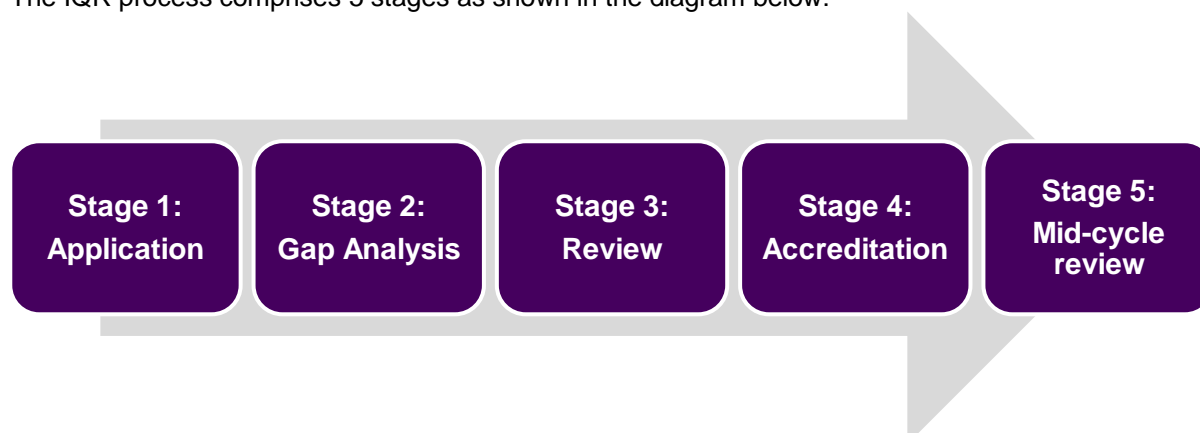
International Quality Review (IQR) for ACE Impact was specially developed by QAA to provide institutions taking part in ACE Impact with an independent peer review (QAA:n.d). The review includes the systematic monitoring and evaluation of learning and teaching, and the processes that support them. It evaluates the standards of academic awards, quality of the student learning experience, and how this is being safeguarded and continually improved.

IQR provides ACE Institutions with an independent peer review, leading to institutional accreditation by QAA using the European Standards and Guidelines. This supports ACE centres in being able to self-evaluate their quality assurance policies and practices and to demonstrate that their institution conforms to international standards. QAA has conducted reviews in English and French.

QAA is currently working on accreditation with eleven institutions in Nigeria, two in Ghana and three in Côte d'Ivoire.

The IQR Process

The IQR process comprises 5 stages as shown in the diagram below:



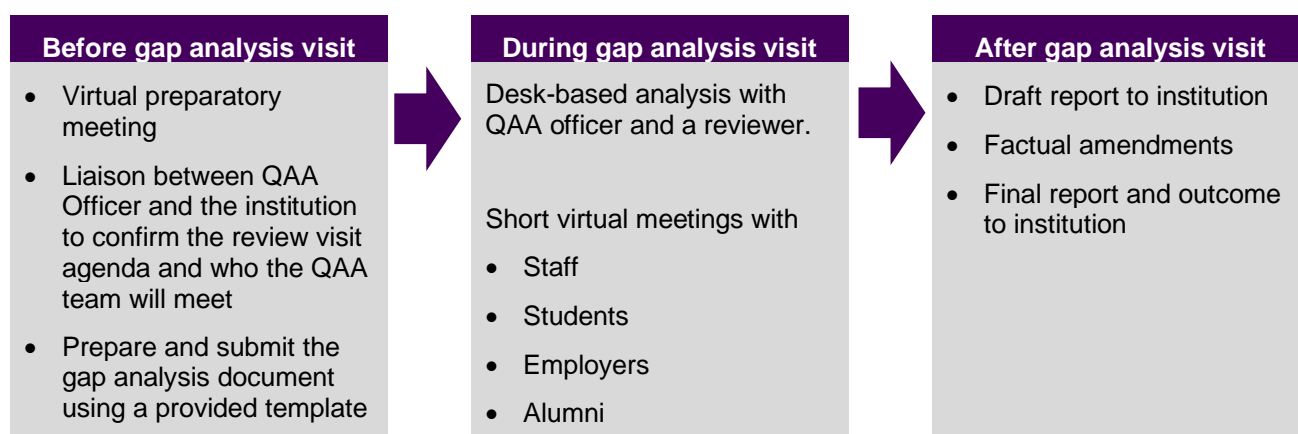
Application

First an application form is completed and submitted with a small set of documents relating to the type of institution and that it has relevant government permissions to operate. This is reviewed by a Screening Panel to determine whether the institution is suitable to undergo IQR and proceed to the gap analysis stage.

Gap analysis

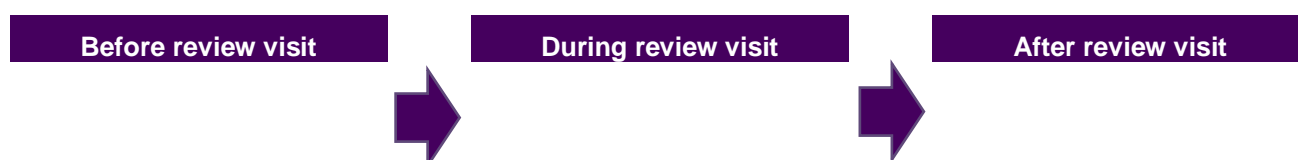
The institution conducts its own self-evaluation of its policies and processes against each of the ten ESG standards as set out in Part 1 (ENQA 2021). This also enables the institution to learn more about IQR for ACE Impact and the requirements for review. We provide guidance and a detailed handbook on how to do the evaluation, which takes approximately four months to complete. The institution carries out the gap analysis focusing on its internal quality assurance systems. It is also asked to provide a set of evidence to support its analysis. A QAA review team analyses the documentation and meets key people from the institution by hosting virtual meetings. The reviewers aim to identify where the institution needs to carry out further development or capacity building to enable it to evidence compliance with the ESG standards and hence its readiness to go to the full review stage.

Gap analysis is particularly pertinent for bridging the gaps between the institution's understanding of the ESG, but also for QAA to know the institution's approach to quality assurance and to be able to contextualise the ESG to the cultural, social and institutional environment in which they will be applied. The diagram below illustrates the process.



Review

The review is an opportunity for the institution to demonstrate how it meets each of the Standards of the ESG. A self-evaluation document (SED) is required and optionally a student submission, supported by relevant evidence. This is completed over a six-month period. The institution provides a lead facilitator as the main contact. The review team comprises at least three people - one UK based peer reviewer, one international peer reviewer and one student reviewer. This team composition facilitates holistic approaches to the review, a diversity of perspectives contributing to forming the recommendations and eventually conditions and judgements of the review. The review team analyses the submission prior to visiting the institution. The review team will meet staff, students and other stakeholders over normally three days. A report is written setting out its findings on whether or not each of the standards is met, along with recommendations and aspects of good practice. The diagram below illustrates the process.



- Review team appointed
- Virtual preparatory meeting
- Institution submission
- Desk-based analysis

- Meetings with head of institution
- Meeting with staff, students, employers and alumni, as relevant
- Observation of facilities and learning resources
- Final meeting with head of the institution

- Draft report to QAA moderation
- Draft report to institution
- Factual amendments
- Report revised and finalised

Accreditation

The review team presents the review report and the recommendation to QAA who determines whether the institution can be awarded Institutional Accreditation. If successful, the accreditation period is for five years and is subject to a mid-cycle review. QAA publishes the review report on its website together with a link to an action plan which is published on the institution's website. The action plan is developed by the institution in response to the conclusions of the review report.

Mid-cycle review

This takes place two to three years after a successful review. It is a desk-based study, and the institution is asked to provide a brief evidence-based report summarising:

- major changes in the structure and organisation of the institution since the review
- key strategic developments (for example, in learning and teaching, research or information management) since the review
- developments in collaborative arrangements with partner institutions or other organisations since the review
- actions taken to address any recommendations in the review report
- actions taken to further any features of good practice identified in the review report
- the institution's intentions for the further development of quality assurance procedures and for the enhancement of learning opportunities.

Two members of the original panel review the documentation. The review team produce a report setting out their conclusions about the actions undertaken since the review and highlighting perceived strengths and weaknesses in current and future plans for quality assurance and enhancement. The report will also propose a conclusion regarding the continuing validity of the QAA accreditation.

How has this assisted universities to create and develop policies and supply evidence of their implementation?

The accreditation process is detailed and has quite a few stages. It is evidence-based and relies on the institution being able to provide not just a self-evaluation document but a substantial pack of supportive evidence. For many institutions this has been a new experience and just taking part in the process has resulted in considerable self-reflection and identification of actions.

The gap analysis stage assists the institution to critically self-reflect and determine actions for itself. This alone has been transformational for the identification of improvements and for demonstrating the benefits that a detailed self-review can bring. Our reports from this stage often highlight important gaps in policies and processes and encourage development. Although all the institutions provided information and evidence against each ESG standard it was not unusual for institutions to not complete the section in our process on gaps. There may be some reluctance to highlight things to an external body. This stage is also important for QAA to contextualise its approach to the specific environment in which the institution operates. The reviewers used the information provided to identify

possible gaps in policies and procedures and these are fed back to the institution in the report. Below is presented the most common gaps identified.

Publication and sharing of information.

All institutions had a website but, in most cases, it was only used for advertising the courses, admission processes and details of courses/facilities. There was normally no information available to the wider public on topics such as teaching, learning and assessment procedures, pass rates, learning opportunities and graduate employment. Programme regulations were not published. Also the information that was published was frequently outdated. An example is the reporting of accreditation visits by professional bodies where many of the dates for reaccreditation had expired. There was usually not a formal process and team with responsibility to ensure that public information is complete, accurate and up to date.

Institutions have a large reliance on paper-based documentation. This results in problems with the distribution of information. Key documents kept in offices are not widely available and understood. One example is the description of the governance structure of the institution and papers from its key committees. It was also often not clear how committees work together and share information. A second example is institutions storing in a central office the minutes from quality and other committees at department, faculty and university level.

Student involvement in committees

There was a lack of student involvement evident in most of the processes of institutions. For example, students were not represented on most committees and hence were limited in taking an active role in feeding back their opinions on processes or contributing to the design of programmes. They were not often involved in programme periodic reviews and given opportunity to express views on possible improvements and enhancements.

Although surveys are frequently used to obtain views from students, there was a lack of evidence on how these were analysed and acted upon. Also, there was often no clear mechanisms for informing students about the changes that they have made in light of their feedback.

Feedback to students on assessments

Although students reported they did receive feedback on their work, it was usually done at individual teacher level and there was not a policy and hence consistent approach to this or to supporting students on their overall progression. Students were aware of examination regulations and the requirements for passing and progressing, but communication of this information was not consistent and relied on individual staff.

Committee structure and policies

Institutions are required to have a comprehensive set of quality assurance policies for the student journey, including admissions; assessment; course design; external expertise; approaches to learning; student engagement; monitoring and evaluation; mitigating circumstances, academic misconduct complaints and appeals. Unfortunately these were often formally available or approved and so it was difficult to assess fully if the institution has a comprehensive quality assurance system that supports the development of a quality culture. The approach for student-centred learning, teaching and assessment was not formally expressed through the development of a strategy and/or plans for teaching, learning and assessment.

A frequent recommendation from reviewers was for the institution to develop clear terms of reference for all its committees to clarify roles, responsibilities, operations, tenure and obligations, in accordance with any specific legislative requirements. Staff and students were unable to articulate institutional approaches, policy, and procedures. They should know where to access information ideally through a detailed website/intranet/library, and ideally in a single location.

Use of data for continuous improvement with external contributions

Data was collected but it was not clear how data is used systematically to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. It was unclear which data is collected and used to promote the systematic and ongoing enhancement of programmes and systems and learning opportunities for the benefit of students. An example would be how data is used to support student progression and retention.

It was common to observe that there is a lack of external stakeholders involved in the curriculum design, annual monitoring and periodic internal review of curriculum. There was infrequent use of alumni and employers to help develop the curriculum.

Its contribution to providing institutions with a greater knowledge of international quality assurance systems.

All institutions took the process seriously and diligently collated together documentation against the ESG standards. They had clearly invested considerable time in the process with many professional services and academic staff involved. This probably has helped them to understand and disseminate expectations and practice in measuring quality assurance throughout the institution. Students also contributed to meetings and the importance of their voice has emphasised by reviewers. Without this effort the benefit of undergoing an accreditation process would have been a lost opportunity.

Institutions are now taking the time to create documentation and review their operation ready for the site visit reviews. These have recently begun, and review panels are challenging how policies and systems are used in practice across an institution.

The added benefits of undergoing an external accreditation process

Of course, gaining an accreditation badge and certification that can be displayed on the institution website will be seen as a mark of quality and also give a marketing advantage over other local institutions. However this is not really the main benefit of undertaking a year-long accreditation process. For many institutions this is their first exposure to a detailed external accreditation process. Some have experienced local government or subject level review at course level, but not a process that looks across the institution. The detailed external scrutiny of processes, procedures and practice using the wide definition of quality assurance has enabled internal reflection and some intense discussion over actions.

The gap analysis encouraged key staff to look at the institution from a distance and discover or acknowledge gaps where they can develop. There were frequent comments relating to the opportunities from improving the use of student contributions and data when making decisions. Many institutions also saw the benefits of having formal process to update and improve their website and having a clear and well used set of policy and procedure documents to help the overall running and efficiency of the institution.

Management appears to have gained benefit as the process requires a detailed approach and focuses on system operation and improvements. It also provides information and guidance to registry teams on how they can make use of data and the student voice for enhancement of both processes and courses. As a result, institutions will become more aligned to international normal in terms of evidencing their activities.

The nature of the appointment of reviewers from the UK and internationally, and the inclusion of a student reviewer has had interesting intercultural interaction. Colleagues in the institution have had direct exposure to European norms and views, whereas reviewers were able to contrast those with local educational approaches. The use of staff and facilities, which are sometimes limited, showed the review teams the ingenuity and new flexible skills that have been developed to teach particularly technology demanding subjects.

Institutions have appreciated this expose to international perspectives on quality assurance and its reliance on being able to support statement and operations with clear policies and procedures. Obtaining accreditation will result in reputational gain and additional confidence from their local community in the standard of the institution. This will hopefully lead them towards greater growth and opportunities to increase industrial links and alliances which will benefit the students and also hopefully open opportunities for research and entrepreneurship.

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