Institutional Evaluations in Africa:
A Joint African and European Pilot Project

Andree Sursock (andree.sursock@eua.be)
&

Tia Loukkola (tia.loukkola@eua.be)
European University Association, Belgium

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a pilot evaluation project, QA-Connect, conducted jointly by the Association of African Universities and the European University Association in 2010-12. Five universities were selected to test an institutional evaluation methodology in different national and institutional contexts. The universities were located in the following countries: Republic of Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, and Nigeria. These pilot evaluations were endorsed by the universities that were evaluated as well as by their evaluation teams and were found to be useful to institutional development, particularly to their strategic capacity and the development of their internal quality processes. Relying on bi-regional evaluation teams, the QA-Connect project used an institutional evaluation instrument that was developed in the early 1990s to answer the strategic development needs of European universities. After a brief presentation of the evaluation methodology and how it was adapted to the project, the paper seeks to answer three questions: What have been the obstacles and success factors of this pilot project? What benefits the participating universities expect to derive from it? To what extent an instrument developed in a European context is suited to the variety of African contexts? The analysis is based on a scrutiny of the five evaluation reports, two questionnaires (to the evaluation teams and the institutions) and discussions during a post-evaluation seminar that addressed all aspects of the project.

Key words: Evaluation, institutional development, strategic development, internal quality assurance

Introduction

Quality Assurance (QA) in Africa has been developing since the 1990s when a number of countries established QA agencies. In addition, steps have been taken to create a shared understanding of QA across the continent through such initiatives as: AfriQAN (pan-African QA network established by AAU, with UNESCO financial support), and regional QA developments driven by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Superieur (CAMES), and the Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa (HEQMISA). As Lenga (2011) noted, however, whilst these have been useful and important first steps, considerable work remains in order to both raise institutional awareness for the need to develop QA and strengthen regional support instruments.

It is in this context that the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the European University Association (EUA) agreed to undertake a pilot evaluation project to respond to these two needs and to do so by testing the approach of EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) as a potential evaluation method that could inspire AAU's future QA activities. Particularly, AAU was interested in the IEP's stress on the self-evaluation phase and the long history of the programme, which carried out about 300 evaluations in 45 countries successfully.

After a brief description of IEP, this paper analyses the QA-Connect project, seeking to answer three questions: What have been the obstacles and successes of this pilot project? What benefits the participating universities expect to derive from it? To what extent an instrument developed in a European context is suited to the variety of African contexts?

The paper, derived from the forthcoming project report, is based on an analysis of the five evaluation reports and feedback collected from the institutions and the expert teams taking part in the evaluations and representatives of regional associations from Africa and Europe.

The IEP's Philosophy and Methodology

The key to understanding IEP's philosophy and methodology is found in its origin. In the early 1990s, the CRE, Association of European Universities,

launched the IEP as an activity for its member institutions. CRE represented universities from 1957 to 2001 when it was succeeded by EUA.

IEP was launched at a time when only four of the then twelve member states of the European Union (EU) had a QA agency. European policy discussions in 1991 centred on the idea of creating a European QA agency. This option was not retained but the EU encouraged member states to establish national QA agencies. Thus, IEP was developed in a relatively open QA environment, but one with a looming threat that external QA could develop in an intrusive manner.

In launching IEP, the association wished to demonstrate that universities could regulate themselves and to propose an evaluation model that was suited to the university environment and would act as an alternative "to more bureaucratic and intrusive methodologies that might be initiated by governments of the EU member states" (Amaral and Sursock, 2008:37).

Purpose of the IEP Methodology

As a voluntary activity of the association, the IEP methodology was conceived as a tool for strengthening universities and ensuring that they respond strategically to the evolving demands placed upon them. Thus, the evaluation methodology focuses upon the university's **capacity for change,** by examining its decision-making structures and processes (including internal quality assurance) and the extent to which these support institutional aspirations and objectives.

Guiding Questions

The evaluation is guided by four key questions which form the backbone of the exercise:
• *What is the institution trying to do?* i.e., How does it define its mission and objectives? Are the objectives realistic and achievable?
• *How is the institution trying to do it?* i.e., What are the decision - making processes? How are authority and responsibility distributed across the institution?

- *How does it know it works?* i.e., How are activities monitored? What information is collected and are the results of the institutional data analyses and the evaluations used effectively?
- *How does the institution change in order to improve?* i.e., What is the university's capacity to address its shortcomings and to adapt to a changing environment?

As mentioned, IEP was initially conceived as a tool to support the university association's membership: at the time, this membership spanned 45 countries, with vastly different financial resources, conceptions of the place and role of universities and of their relationship to the state. In this context, it was deemed important to ensure that IEP does not evaluate on the basis of a uniform set of external criteria but that it examines each institution on its own terms and seeks to provide recommendations in a supportive way (i.e., formative evaluation). The mission-driven, formative evaluation approach is still central today. Almost 20 years after its launch, whilst IEP has continuously been refined in response to internal scrutiny and external feedback, its core methodology has not required any change and has been used successfully in a variety of national contexts, including outside Europe: in Africa, Japan, Latin America, and the Middle East.

The general IEP approach consists of the following practical steps:
- Based on the IEP guidelines (cf. IEP website), the participating university is asked to conduct **self-evaluation** and submit a self-evaluation report before the visits of the expert team take place. The self-evaluation is centred upon the four key questions listed above. Because these questions are open-ended, they allow the institutions to focus on the issues that are of particular strategic importance to them, whether it is management, research and educational developments, internationalisation, contribution to the local community, etc.

  IEP stresses that the self-evaluation process is fundamental to the success of the evaluation. It is not meant to simply produce a self-evaluation report but to trigger an internally- driven change process. Therefore, the universities are instructed to involve their different constituencies as broadly as possible in the process.

Composition of Teams

- Five evaluators are selected from a stable pool of experts, three of whom are current or past rectors or vice rectors. A student is also included in the team, as well as a senior HE expert, acting as a team coordinator. None of the team members are from the country in which they conduct an evaluation. A yearly seminar, to which all experts are invited, is organised at the beginning of every evaluation round to induct new members, provide an update on recent developments in higher education, hone evaluation skills, etc.

  Four particular features are worth mentioning here. First, the inclusion of rectors ensures a true peer-to-peer exchange with the leadership of the participating university. Second, the IEP relies on a relatively small and stable pool, which accumulates experience and develops in-depth understanding of higher education institutions. Third, the appointment to the post of team chair is considered only when the expert has acquired significant IEP experience and demonstrated his/her evaluation skills and commitment to the IEP philosophy and methodology. Fourth, because IEP is anchored in a university association, the pool maintains its currency through updates about major trends in higher education, generated through the association's other activities (e.g., projects, research and conferences).

Procedure

The self-evaluation report prepared by the university is submitted to the team which is given some time, at least four weeks, to study the report. If
- the team requires more initial information, or explanation on any of the items, this is obtained from the university
- The evaluation team undertakes a first visit to get acquainted with the institution. Meetings are held with different institutional leaders, faculties, students, and any other identified relevant stakeholders etc., as a means to understanding the institution in its context. This visit lasts between three and four days.

The term rector is used as a generic for the top leadership position in an institution.

This first visit was originally designed to build the evaluation team's knowledge of the context in which the institution operates. This was considered important given the large diversity of European universities. It has since proven to be useful also because it provides an opportunity to correct any weaknesses in the self-evaluation report: the first visit ends generally with a request for additional information. It is also useful in establishing rapport with the university community and explaining the philosophy of IEP.

- A second visit, about three months after the first visit, is conducted to deepen the team's knowledge of the institution and to formulate and confirm its findings. The team also meets with various groups within the university especially those not met during the first visit. It ends with the presentation of an oral report that the evaluation team presents to the university leadership, the university community, and often also to a range of external stakeholders.

  The team works hand-in-hand with the university members that prepared the self-evaluation report, particularly with the leadership of that group.

- The draft evaluation report is prepared by the team coordinator, with contribution from all team members. It is sent to the institution for correction of factual errors. The final version is posted on the IEP website.

  In the course of two decades, IEP has developed from a rather informal peer review into an independently governed evaluation programme, with well- developed structures and processes. Today, IEP is recognised as an external quality assurance provider in Europe. Following an external review, IEP has been accepted as a full member of ENQA (European **Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and is listed in EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education), a register of trustworthy Q A agencies operating in Europe.**

Adapting the IEP Methodology to the Europe-Africa QA-Connect Project

When the IEP methodology was selected as the basis for QA-Connect, the project partners discussed whether and how certain aspects of the IEP methodology should be adapted in order to ensure its suitability to the specific characteristics of the African higher education systems.

One key consideration was that the evaluations should entail a truly bi-regional dimension, by drawing upon African and European expertise. Thus, two experts and one student from Africa were included in each team. One major difference with established IEP practice is that some of the African experts were not rectors, former rectors or vice rectors; nevertheless, they were selected for their commitment, relevance and depth of experience.

The IEP guidelines were discussed with the expert teams during a training workshop. Given the IEP's stress on institutional autonomy, African experts noted that the national and legal context in some African countries may not permit such an emphasis, and drew attention to the political sensitivities of this issue in their region, and also the different understandings of the issue. The teams took note of this. Aside from this point, the guidelines were found to be sufficiently flexible to adapt to the various African higher education contexts. They required no modification aside from those related to practical aspects.

Selecting the Institutions

One of the goals of this pilot project w^as to test the suitability of IEP methodology in different institutional and national contexts. An open call for participation in the pilot evaluations was disseminated among AAU members. AAU selected five universities with a view to optimising geographic balance. Of the five institutions, one was located in a Francophone country and four in Anglophone countries, in different African regions. They were:
- Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria
- Institute of Professional Studies, Ghana
- Kenyatta University, Kenya
- University ofNamibia, Namibia
- **Universite Omar Bongo, Republic of Gabon**

The five institutions differed in such aspects as age, size, relationship to the State, etc.

- The smallest of the five universities enrolls about 7 000 students, in three faculties located on a single campus. The largest enrolls 40 000 students and includes twelve faculties and thirteen specialised institutes, distributed on two campuses. This university has also several branch campuses and extensions across the country.

- All five are public institutions but there are differences in their relationship to their national authorities and the accountability to which they must adhere.
- Four universities derived their funding mostly from public sources. The fifth is reported to have a fee-driven budget (from students and other sources) and receives only 40% funding from the State.
- Three of the five are perceived as the leading institution in their region or country, which means that they have an even more important role to play in national or regional development.
- The campus environment differs: some enjoy well-maintained campuses and decent infrastructure, whilst, at the other end of the spectrum, two suffer from inadequate infrastructure, power and water outages, and no building maintenance. Efforts are underway, however, to upgrade campuses in most cases.

Beyond these differences, the five universities shared aspects in common. They are relatively young, having been established between 1962 and 1992, often as an outgrowth of an existing tertiary institution. Most importantly, these universities have been facing a set of similar challenges, which have affected their activities. They have had to respond to increased demand for higher education in a particularly challenging context characterised by limited public resources and the unpreparedness of the labour markets to absorb their graduates. The consequences of fiscal austerity and massification include such aspects as: overcrowded classrooms, heavy teaching workloads, limited levels of research activities, generally weak IT i

nfrastructure, poorly- resourced libraries, brain drain and, in some cases, competition over staff with the requisite qualifications.

The evaluation teams were very understanding of these constraints and provided the universities a range of recommendations related to their core mission, governance, management, and strategic capacity. Given the wealth of data and space limitation, interested readers are encouraged to consult the QA-Connect website for access to the five evaluation reports and the project report.

Analysis of the Project

The following sections consider several aspects of the project: the success and obstacle factors, the adaptability of IEP methodology in the variety of African contexts and the benefits that universities have and are expected to derive from their evaluations.

These sections are based on the results of two questionnaires: one to institutions and another to experts. In addition, a post-evaluation workshop gathered representatives from the institutions, most of the experts, and representatives from regional networks. Along with representatives from AAU and EUA, the regional networks that were represented included: the Higher Education Quality Assurance Initiative of Southern Africa (HEQMISA), the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The workshop addressed all aspects of the pilot project and provided ample opportunity for discussion and input from all.

Success and Obstacles

What have been the obstacles and success factors identified by the project participants?

By and large, the IEP methodology worked very well. The difficulties and obstacles encountered were not unusual or specific to the African contexts: IEP teams have faced them frequently, in Europe and elsewhere in the world, particularly in places where QA processes are new. In addition, most of these

difficulties were apparent during the first visits and were addressed to ensure the usefulness of the second visits and the reliability of the evaluation reports. Step by step, the challenges included:

- The self-evaluation process: as noted earlier, the self-evaluation process and the resulting report are very important to the success of the exercise. All universities followed the guidelines by setting up a self-evaluation committee, chaired by someone other than the rector. Some conducted specific activities (such as focus groups, interviews and questionnaires) to gather data. Among the challenges met during the self-evaluation process, the institutions included the following aspects:

  - The identification and selection of members of the internal self- evaluation committee in a context where work overload made it difficult to devote time to the self-evaluation process.
  - Some universities commented that there was an initial reticence or scepticism about the evaluation, which made it difficult to get quality input for the self-evaluation.
  - Mobilising stakeholders for participation: thus, one institution commented that 'external stakeholders' (e.g., parents, local organisations, industry) found it strange to be invited to participate in a university evaluation, yet were highly appreciative of the experience after having been involved.
  - Solicitation and generation of the data/information from the various units of the university and ensuring the currency of data. This was particularly difficult for universities with many campuses.

Two other organisations were invited but could not attend due to various reasons: the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission for Higher Education,and the Conseil African et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Superieur (CAMES).

Given these challenges, all five institutions felt they would have needed more time to prepare the self-evaluation. In addition, the universities would have wished more support during this phase through more detailed guidelines and on-going support.

All these reactions are frequent on the part of universities participating in IEP, which requires producing a self-evaluation report that balances description and critical analysis, and encourages them to think about their institution strategically.

•   The self-evaluation report: the five self-evaluation reports were provided in time for the first visits, as required. Some self-evaluation reports were extremely thorough; others were commended by the evaluation teams for their honesty but lacked evidence-based argumentation due to the scarcity of solid institutional data; still others did not identify key strategic priorities or were qualified as not being analytical. These weaknesses were clearly linked to the fact that the self-evaluation process was new to some universities and

further support would have been useful. Most importantly, however, the lack of solid institutional data was identified as a major structural weakness, linked to the poor ICT infrastructure and lack of experience in internal QA processes.

•   Site visits: several difficulties were highlighted as follows:
  - In general, the evaluation process is facilitated by the openness of the institutional leadership, which allows the evaluation team to identify quickly the main issues and priorities of the institution. Typically, this openness is more likely to be present when the university has had some prior evaluation experience with a similar formative philosophy as that of IEP. This being said, the rapport established during the first visit helps the second visit to proceed smoothly and with more openness. This was the case for these pilot evaluations as well.

    - The schedule of the site visits included a range of meetings

- some of which required the presence of a limited number of university staff. Although the QA-Connect guidelines were very clear about the composition and size of each group for each meeting, in some cases, groups were larger than expected during the first visits, which complicated the conversation. This was notably the case when hierarchical levels were mixed, which led the junior staff to be less active and possibly not express their opinions as openly as they would have if they had been met alone. This inclusive approach to meetings - again, not unusual in other parts of the world - was corrected for the second visits.
- Due to a strong culture of hospitality, some teams were accompanied at all times, particularly during the first visits, including during some of the times reserved for the team's debriefing. Whilst the teams welcomed the friendliness and warmth, they requested time alone to debrief during the second visit because it is essential for the preparation of the oral report.

- Meetings with external stakeholders (such as local industry, government and organisations, parents, police, etc.) were deemed critical to the process. This feature was novel to some universities, which had difficulties identifying and securing appointments with them.
- Evaluation reports: The evaluation reports: following standard practice, universities received their draft reports to correct factual errors. They were also encouraged to provide feedback on the findings and recommendations in the reports, which some of them did.
  The participants also discussed the success factors and identified the following:
- The emphasis on the self-evaluation phase was deemed to be particularly useful in contributing to institutional development. This

is in line with the general feedback received on IEP.

- The team composition brought a rich diversity of expertise and national/regional insights. This confirms the IEP experience: there is great value in having experts with diverse backgrounds (national, disciplinary, etc.) in teams although, in the future, these experts could all come from within Africa, with a combination of those coming from within the region in which the university is located and those from outside the region, to enable cross-fertilisation of experiences. The inclusion of mature and motivated students with international experience was also deemed an asset.

- Strong support from the university leadership and a very good local liaison person, engaged and committed and with enough clout to persuade colleagues to contribute to the evaluation process.
- Both the universities and the teams saw the two site visits as useful. The first site visits help not only to contextualise the information received in the self-evaluation report but also to build trust. The universities found it useful to have the whole team present during a first visit because it is the combination of background and expertise that ensures the team's legitimacy.
- The site visits included meetings with external stakeholders. This feature was noted as being special to IEP methodology and positive. In brief, the IEP philosophy and general approach were understood and appreciated, although this took more time in some institutions than in others.

The Benefits of Institutional Evaluations

The universities were asked: "Do you think this process was beneficial to your institution? Please identify any results or outcomes that you can use for the future". The responses received mentioned the following:

"It stimulated most of the minds and became a reference point for discussions in meetings. It has contributed to the development of the

quality culture within the university. All the recommendations are very useful and the university is going to implement them."

- Some of the specific recommendations that were highlighted as being useful included developing an institutional QA manual; an approach for monitoring the implementation of the university's strategic plan; a database for staff qualifications; an integrated management information system; and involving external stakeholders in evaluating the university.
- One university mentioned that the report raised important questions that will be discussed at national level with the authorities. Another noted that because the evaluations engage with external stakeholders, they could have an impact on national Q A processes and address gaps in national data collection (e.g., about the higher education system, employment, demography, etc.).

The experts, who were also asked their opinion, ventured the following statements about what they thought the universities had gained:

- Enhanced learning about QA and increased awareness of the need to develop a set of key performance indicators.
- Increased awareness of the need to engage with external stakeholders and the third mission of universities - service to society.
- An opportunity for the top leadership team "to have an external international perspective on, and perhaps some endorsement of, the direction of travel of the university in the areas that IEP considers."
  It should be emphasised that the impact of evaluations is not limited to the universities that are evaluated: the experts take back lessons and ideas that can impact potentially their own institutions and contribute in creating joint understanding about good institutional practices.

  Given this feedback, is the IEP approach to institutional evaluation an

effective and efficient means to contribute to the strategic institutional development of African universities? The experience of the project and the individual evaluations seem to indicate that this is so. Ideally, this should be further explored over a longer period, e.g., in three years, and after about 30 institutions have been evaluated. Based on the IEP experience elsewhere, however, the expected long-term impact would be to:

• Develop internal quality assurance mechanisms and strengthen change management capacity for the five participating universities.

• Develop a strategic and sustainable approach for the enhancement of the entire institution, ultimately also benefitting achievement of the institution's mission.

Because the approach brings in a leadership dimension and has an institutional scope, it can complement other external QA processes such as programme evaluation or accreditation. In other words, it is a good preparation for other types of Q A processes and for increasing the capacity of the universities to monitor and enhance their activities.

Ultimately, the impact of any type of evaluation, including IEP's, depends on a combination of two factors: the pertinence of the recommendations and, most importantly, whether the institutions have the will and the requisite capacity to implement them. This includes considerations of costs and available resources, IT infrastructures and the capacity to collect institutional data, strong leadership and a reasonable degree of institutional autonomy. Some of these aspects are within the control of institutions; others are within the control of the State. Therefore, it is essential to sensitise the institutional leadership across the continent as well as the relevant ministries so as to ensure the establishment of appropriate framework conditions that would enable universities to implement the recommendations.

Is the IEP Methodology Suited to the Variety of African Contexts?

Participating institutions and experts were also asked "Is the IEP's methodological approach applicable to the different African higher education contexts?" Based on the questionnaires and the discussions at the

post-evaluation workshop, the answer was a resounding yes. The formative philosophy was understood and accepted and the methodology was embraced.

So successful was this project that participants in the post-evaluation workshop recommended that a similar programme be established in Africa. They noted that there is no conflict between the approach used by IEP and existing national and institutional QA processes and saw the institutional evaluations as a complementary enhancement to other QA approaches

Concluding Remarks

Quality assurance is developing quickly in Africa: national QA agencies are being established in a context characterised by the emergence of a higher education market, greater competition and the rise of private, for-profit institutions and international branch campuses.

In such a context, developing a programme similar to IEP would be positive in preparing universities for their national evaluation exercise and would further strengthen the institutions' role in managing quality, thus raising quality levels. It is hoped that the findings of this project would contribute to further development of Q A in Africa.

References

AAU & EUA (2012). *Europe-Africa Connect: Project Results and Future Prospects* (forthcoming in September 2012), http://www.qaconnect- africa.eu/

Amaral, A., & Sursock, A. (2008). Self-regulation in Europe: the Institutional Evaluation Programme. *Essays on Supportive Peer Review.* Amaral, A. *et al.*(Eds.), pp. 35-47, Nova Science Publishers.

Lenga, F.K. (2011). Regional approaches to quality assurance - the Africa perspective, *Quality Assurance International Conference,* Brussels, 14-15 December 2011. (http://www.qaconnect-africa.eu/en/qa-in-africa.

Websites
AAU: http://www.aau.org/
IEP: http://www.eua.be/iep
QA-Connect: http://www.qaconnect-africa.eu/
ENQA: http://www.enqa.eu/
EQAR: http://www.eqar.eu/

Acronyms

AAU	Association of African Universities
AfriQAN	African Quality Assurance Network
CAMES	Conseil afficain et malgache pour l'enseignement superieur
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EUA	European University Association
HEQMISA	Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa
IEP EUA's	Institutional Evaluation Programme
IUCE A	Inter-University Council for East Africa