



Benchmarking Quality Assurance in Cambodian Higher Education



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Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions in Cambodia

ABSTRACT:

The concept of Quality Assurance (QA) in Higher Education has gained significant momentum worldwide. There is a pressing demand for prospective highly-skilled and knowledgeable workforce who is capable of coping with the challenges of knowledge-based societies. Consequently, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must rise to the occasion and build a coherent, well-funded quality environment. Needless to say, the role of QA is paramount in the development of a quality culture in HE as well as in promoting such enhancement of quality. Thus, QA is a continuous issue on HEIs' agenda. In the current study, QA is presented as the means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced. This report presents the information collected and scrutinised on QA practices and trends—including framework conditions, information systems, standards and procedures—in Cambodian HEIs in order to gain a more nuanced overview of the current situation, upgrade the resources available according to the findings, and finally, implement the acquired knowledge for improvement via self-evaluation as well as draft a medium-to long-term strategic plan.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, Quality Assurance (QA) has emerged as a key factor for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) all over the world to facilitate comparability and readability of academic achievements and degrees as well as to enhance cooperation and mobility. QA in Europe, which is embedded in the Bologna Process, is seen as a good practice to follow in many regions willing to improve performance in this field. Indeed, as a crucial element to an internationally competitive HE, QA is of the utmost importance for countries immersed in HE reforms which are wishing to adapt and conform to global/regional trends. This would be the case of Cambodia which, with unparalleled and enormous efforts, has turned from one of the world's poorest countries to a lower middle-income country today in scarcely twenty years' time.

Although commonly accepted as the means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced, "Quality assurance" is a generic term in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations: It is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances", as stated by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (also known simply as the "European Standards and Guidelines" or the ESG). These ESG were the result of the joint efforts of the ministers responsible for European HE in 2005 in the wake of a proposal prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in co-operation with the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA). Thus, the definition of QA standards is under continuous development.

Globalisation and the gradual opening of borders, together with an increase in academic mobility, and a fast-changing labour market worldwide have become a day-to-day reality in recent times. In the light of this scenario, the mission of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) themselves also becomes more diversified, which translates, i.e., into a boost in the internationalisation and new forms of education delivery. It follows that HEIs are key actors when it comes to promote lifelong learning, one of the reasons behind their efforts for offering a quality education. This can be best achieved by providing lifelong learners with a more student-centred approach to learning and teaching, which leads to responsive and tailored learning paths as well as competences accomplished outside the strictly academic curricula. But not only that, HEIs have certainly a prevailing need for transparency and external accountability, the necessity to further assess

that quality so that the qualifications attained at each institution are also recognised outside the country of origin within a more comprehensive educational framework.

There is no doubt that QA processes help make HE more transparent and trustworthy for both students and scholars as well as for stakeholders from other countries and even other continents. Therefore, the role of QA is paramount in supporting HE systems and institutions to rise to the occasion and build a coherent, well-funded quality environment, all while ensuring that the qualifications achieved by the students as well as their HE experience remain major priorities for HEIs. Still, the implementation and streamlining of QA policies and practices which have been progressively integrated at European HEIs during the last decades are kept under constant review.

Cambodia for its part has formulated an ambitious policy for HE reform, the HE Vision 2030 and QA being an integral part of the that policy. Some of its main strategies include ensuring that HEIs develop QA systems and/or specific units to meet national accreditation standards and allow full participation in the global system of quality-assured HE. Action lines to implement the abovementioned objective imply establishing internal QA mechanisms, fostering capacities and skills, as well as infrastructures, and conducting regular internal self-assessment of the management and programmes, amongst others. In conclusion, the landscape in Cambodia, however purposeful, shows that there is still a pressing need to develop and strengthen institutional capacity in HEIs in order to enhance the culture of QA, as commented more in detail in Section 2 below.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The European QA Experience

Given the importance of creating and encouraging a reliable quality culture in the context of HE, the aforementioned ESG were developed in line with the Bologna process as 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on QA' for the purpose of exploring 'ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for QA and/or accreditation agencies or bodies'. However, considerable progress and changes have been made in this field since then, which in 2012 led to prepare a new proposal — on this occasion, in cooperation also with Education International (EI), BusinessEurope and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) — for a revised version of the ESG in order 'to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope'.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) distinguishes itself by its diversity of political systems, HE systems, socio-cultural and educational backgrounds as well as traditions, languages, aims and objectives. ESG's key goal is to contribute to the common understanding of QA for learning and teaching whether at the European, national or institutional level amongst all stakeholders, which includes relevant links to research, governance, and innovation. Thus, the ESG are based on the following principles:

- HEIs have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- QA responds to the diversity of HE systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- QA supports the development of a quality culture;
- QA considers the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

This engagement with QA processes, and more specifically with their external aspect, is geared towards building a role model, a beacon of trust with which engender greater transparency — without which it would be unthinkable to achieve, i.e., better recognition of qualifications and programmes in HE across national borders in the EHEA. Thus, transparency, an ongoing objective of all European HE systems, remains a crucial issue to demonstrate quality and build mutual trust.

But not only are the ESG a key instrument used by HEIs in Europe. Most European HEIs or study programmes are subject to regular external review by a QA agency. In this regard, the EQAR is the one body responsible for the register of QA agencies in Europe that comply with the ESG, which are also employed here as a reference document for internal and external QA systems in HE. EQAR, whose mission is to design a coherent QA framework for the EHEA in which qualifications are thus universally recognised, aims at providing the public with clear and reliable information on QA agencies operating in the region. Thus, the Register, which is web-based and freely accessible, has been chiefly established to:

- promote student mobility by providing a basis for the increase of trust amongst HEIs;
- reduce opportunities for "accreditation mills" to gain credibility;
- provide a basis for governments to authorise HEIs to choose any agency from the Register, if that is compatible with national arrangements;

- provide a means for HEIs to choose between different agencies, if that is compatible with national arrangements; and
- serve as an instrument to improve the quality of agencies and to promote mutual trust amongst them.

Although it is commonly acknowledged that all stakeholders in the EHEA do share their views on QA, there are a few differences in perspectives and approaches which depend on factors such as: the purpose assigned to HE; the balance between accountability and enhancement in the QA system; and levels of trust, maturity, and self-confidence in the QA system at institutional and at national levels. Furthermore, it is clear that there is still work to do in bridging the gap between the theory of a QA system and how it works in practice. QA should be treated as yet an additional tool for fostering quality HE, so finding synergies with other tools and supporting collaboration amongst stakeholders are key channels for increasing efficiency and avoiding duplication of work.

2.2 The Cambodian context on HE and QA practises

Nowadays, QA is a hot topic on the PCUs' education agendas since the lack of a sound structure of QA at both national and institutional levels is becoming increasingly critical.

After a three-decade-long conflict raging in Cambodia where almost three quarters of its educated population were lost, the country has experienced a noteworthy economic growth over the last few years. The government of Cambodia, in its pursuit to overcome the aftermath of the past regime, strived to ensure its full commitment to education in general and HE and research in particular. And thus was reflected in the national Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2006-2010, which particularly focussed on raising awareness of the importance of improvements in quality as well as on enlarging the provision of education.

As it stands, the Cambodian HE sector has made considerable progress and expanded strongly in both the public and – especially – private sectors ever since, with a gross enrolment ratio increasing from just 2.4 in 2001 to 15.9 in 2011 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics - UIS, 2016). Despite this substantial growth, participation in HE has been subject to a number of peaks and troughs in the national politics. There were 9,228 students enrolled in tertiary education in 1970; by 1980 this figure had fallen to 702. Since then, the system has grown quite rapidly and, although enrolment rates did not return to 1970 levels until the 1990s (8,764 students in 1992), the pace of expansion has been remarkable: between 1990 and 2000 enrolments quadrupled and between 2000 and 2005

they grew by 260% (UIS). It should be noted that MoEYS statistics show however even higher rates of growth: 223,222 enrolments in 2011 and 207,603 in 2017 since these figures (which are reported by universities) show the number of enrolments rather than the number of actual students, some of which may be enrolled in multiple studies. As in many countries, in Cambodian HE system male enrolments are substantially higher than those of females and although the trend is toward greater equity, Cambodia has the lowest Gender Parity Index (GPI) amongst the neighbouring countries, that is, the greatest imbalance in favour of male enrolment.

This increase in HE enrolments has taken place notably in the public sector but the strongest growth trend can be observed in the proliferation of private institutions – which were not permitted in Cambodia until 1997 – and in a significant growth in the number of fee-paying students in public HEIs. There are now 105 HEIs in Cambodia, 39 of which are state-owned and 66 are private-owned. Besides, governance arrangements are complex, since tertiary education institutions are overseen by 14 different ministries. The MoEYS directly manages 9 public and 56 private HEIs while other 40 institutions are primarily managed by 13 other ministries, with the MoEYS Directorate General for Higher Education playing a coordinating role (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2015). This situation subsequently results in a highly fragmented scenario as far as the governance of public HEIs is concerned. As just one of many involved ministries, the MoEYS faces a lot of difficulties in implementing its policies on HE as opposed to those institutions controlled by other ministries.

As a consequence of this rapid growth, the quality of tertiary education was admittedly under serious strain, although quality improvements in such a daunting context would be challenging for any system. Still, high-skilled students are indeed a need of the first order to meet Cambodia's new labour market demands, otherwise there is a risk that they turn to HE markets in neighbouring countries.

And yet, Cambodia's enrolments are still low, the lowest in fact amongst most ASEAN and other South-East Asian countries. However, improving enrolment rates – one of the easiest dimensions to manage – under conditions of high unmet demand falls short of ensuring the holistic development of a HE system. So further measures equal to the task (adequate facilities, well-trained instructors and administrators, etc.) are also required. As matters stand, the government capacity to provide the Cambodian youth with a quality HE system presents a considerable challenge since that capacity has been far exceeded by the HE demand. Thus, deeper aspects of HE – wise policies; well-organised QA

structures; a culture of research and a pool of trained researchers; an organised and effective teaching body; effective governance and peer professional oversight; adequate funding mechanisms; and even a range of institutions which serve as a model to provide leadership for the HE sector are more difficult and yet pressing factors to recover or construct

As mentioned earlier, private HEIs account for a very large share of tertiary institutions in Cambodia, the underlying motive likely being the influence of globalisation, which encourages a market-driven competition. Still, despite their key role in meeting the high demand for HE, a number of quality-sensitive issues arise due mainly to their programme contents and their educational provision. Private institutions tend to focus on academic programmes that involve lower costs and require little scientific equipment rather than on highly specialised, advanced technical knowledge. Combining this to the large number of regulatory bodies which they are held accountable through – and therefore, more prone to suffer from lack of coordination and misalignment – negative consequences affecting the quality in this sub-sector are likely to be especially severe in a rapidly expanding system such as Cambodia's (Williams, 2014).

In view of the above, the Cambodian government has since pursued a number of structural reforms based on the policies and regulatory agencies put in place with the aim of endowing its HE system with efficient, equitable, quality coverage. To begin with, and due to the competition between ministries, the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) – whose duties are to determine the accreditation status for all HEIs in Cambodia – was placed under the control of the Council of Ministers rather than the MoEYS when it was first established in 2003. This gave rise to much controversy over the ACC's independence until it was finally transferred to the MoEYS in 2013. However, the ACC's management structure has not yet been redefined and its functions may have slowed down as it seems that the MoEYS has not fully accommodated it yet.

On the other hand, the ESP focused on transforming the Department of Higher Education (DHE) to rapidly meet the changing needs in the sector and designated the main roles of the DHE as:

- creation of policies and strategies for the HE sector;
- approval of administration of HEIs;
- support in development of necessary subject programmes and management tools to assist in fulfilling accreditation criteria for HEIs; and
- improvement in the quality and efficiency of HE throughout the country.

For the DHE to put these functions into effect, the expertise and capacity of its staff must be a critical priority and necessarily enhanced (Hirosato, 2009).

Another significant step towards reforming the Cambodian HE system was the introduction of the credit award and credit transfer system by the ACC in 2004. Traditionally, the certification system relied on academic achievement at the end of each academic year. The new credit-based system would leave the necessary flexibility in order to fulfil the course requirements. Similarly, credits earned during exchange programmes or obtained through study at other universities would be thus also recognised. And yet, the credit system was perceived as suffering from a slow pace of implantation; universities did not always adopt the new system properly and many staff and students did not fully understand how it worked. In the light of all this, all indications are that management and administrative capacities in the Cambodian HE system need improvement to cope with its growing size (Kitamura, 2015).

On another front, the Foundation Year Study was also one relevant reform. From 2005 onwards, all undergraduate students were required to take the Foundation Year Course (FYC) Programme during the first year of their bachelor's programme. It was meant to enhance the knowledge about the humanities, mathematics and natural sciences, social sciences, and foreign languages and its main aim was to help meeting the demands of the changing labour market and to promote greater coherency within the HE system (Kitamura, 2015).

Additionally, in 2005 the International Development Association (IDA) also started to support the HE sector in Cambodia financially through the Cambodia Education Sector Support Project (ESSP, 2005–2010). The ESSP included a small component with the purpose of strengthening the capacity of the DHE and the ACC. In 2010, the government requested additional funding for the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP) in order to respond properly to the rising challenges facing the rapid increase in HE enrolments, which had not been accompanied by improvements in educational or institutional quality. With the support of HEQCIP and in consultation of the ACC, the MoEYS began to rebuild the HE system by focusing on improving the quality of institutional teaching, research, and management (World Bank, 2018).

Furthermore, the introduction of the 2007 Education Law – mainly aimed at “developing and strengthening Human Resources (HR) for Cambodia through life-long learning and education for all” – was intended to help orient the future development of the HE sub-sector. It was also conceived to enable and improve quality in educational services delivered by educational institutions by

developing an internal mechanism to monitor and assess the quality of education provided.

Thus, all HEIs were required by the MoEYS to set up their own Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU) in preparation for the external quality assessment from the ACC. However, most HEIs lack the necessary expertise and knowledge about QA processes to create and give support to an IQAU. Nevertheless, the MoEYS itself has not set an IQAU framework for HEIs to follow and has provided little guidance to institutions on how to proceed; the picture is more of the same as for university leadership, which rarely have an academic profile themselves. Thus, in most HEIs IQAU offices are staffed with teachers who have limited knowledge of QA approaches.

As a result of these shortages and deficiencies of guidance as well as well-qualified and experienced staff to implement QA policies successfully in the HE context, many of such policies have been developed by foreign experts and international donor agencies such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Commission on Higher Education and the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment of Thailand, the National Accreditation Board of the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India, the Embassy of the United States, the Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship Program, and the Asia-Pacific Quality Network. As a result, concepts and models from other countries and cultures are often borrowed with little customisation to suit the Cambodian context (Shah, 2017).

As another example of the implementation of measures concerning the challenge of increasing quality in Cambodian HE system, the Supreme National Council for Education was established in 2009 – separately from the MoEYS and chaired by the Prime Minister – with the purpose of advising the Ministry and designing a plan to reform the sector in order to meet the education needs of the young Cambodian generation by creating and developing sound and well-thought education policies. These policies are to include a long-term strategy that seeks to examine, control and assess all education-related activities and mobilised the required resources in response to social and economic development in the country.

In this vein, the Cambodian Qualifications Framework (CQF) was then established in December 2010 by a committee of ministers following the 6th meeting of the National Training Board (NTB). The key objectives of the

government with respect to the creation of the CQF were to (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2012):

- allow nationally consistent recognition of learning outcomes;
- deliver high quality education and training that matches international standards;
- provide mechanisms for credit transfer and for the recognition of prior learning and experience;
- develop flexible pathways to facilitate movement between education and training sectors, as well as between those sectors and the labour market;
- improve access to education and training programmes and to qualifications;
- set out clearly defined avenues for achievement in order to encourage individuals to continue their education;
- provide qualifications that meet the needs of employers as well as learners, thus improving national economic performance; and
- facilitate the mobilisation of a skilled regional workforce.

Thus, although major achievement in this field have taken place over the last decades, much remains to be done and continued efforts are still needed to:

- a) Make institutional management more systematic and transparent, for example, by providing a framework for strategic planning, revenue generation, fund allocation, and reporting that supports the institution as a whole rather than individual departments;
- b) Establish procedures and policies for staff development that recognise that most HE staff need not be fully trained as PhDs. These actions would draw from international experience, which had shown that most courses at the university level could be effectively taught by people with master's degrees (although it was found that at the department level, supervision of these instructors is often best carried out by specialised university staff with PhDs);
- c) Bring the ACC to a level of good international practice and further integrate it into the emerging global and regional community of practitioners in QA;
- d) Establish basic procedures and policies that recognise the interrelationship of teaching and research and place an emphasis on the strengthening of teaching to improve research capacity — that is, basic skills of faculty, curricula, syllabi, libraries, and connectivity; and

- e) Establish a scholarship programme that balances rewards for high-achieving students with support for the poor and incentives to study in fields of strategic importance (World Bank, 2018).

In conclusion, the strategies that the Cambodian government has employed to address the question of the quality of its HE sector are generally not deemed as having been effective in achieving their goal. Amongst the factors identified as major drivers of the ineffectiveness of the government policies on the Cambodian HE scenario in an attempt to improve its quality are, i.a., the many ministries involved in the management of the HE system, what causes a great deal of inconsistency issues as for the implementation of HE policies; the weak management of the ACC and the ACC staff; and the IQAU offices within HEIs, which are in a state of flux at best, if not disregarded or even neglected owing to the lack of qualified staff and actual commitment of all stakeholders involved.

2.3 Project objectives

Upon the above considerations, SICA aligns with PCUs priorities as far as QA processes and mechanisms are concerned with the aim of strengthening institutional capacity and enhancing the culture of QA in Cambodian HEIs in order to support sustainable socio-economic growth. In other words, the project aims at contributing to improve quality education, invigorate students' employability, increase productivity, and make an efficient use of resources.

The identified challenges are to be addressed within the framework of the project through a sound scheme of activities and actions which contribute to Cambodian Higher Education Vision 2030, prioritising the following lines of the project:

- capacity building for professional development;
- the exchange of good practices between Europe and Cambodia;
- the setting up of Internal Quality Assurance Units; and
- the embedding of QA processes.

2.4 Data Collection

Generally speaking, all the universities covered by the present study considered that QA plays a key role in creditable and well-funded HE, which is why it requires more and more attention on behalf of individual institutions as well as from national authorities. The aim of this report is to identify QA practices and trends

at HEIs within the SICA PCUs, including framework conditions, information systems, standards, and procedures.

To that end, several mechanisms have been used to map, complete, and concretise information on the topic, including desk research and a specific survey, which was filled in by six universities from the PC as well as by the national Accreditation Committee (the ACC). All results have been analysed by Agora Institute and are reflected in the current study.

3 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The development of the EHEA through the Bologna Process has contributed to the increase and improvement in cross-border exchanges and cooperation in HE over the past decades, which enables the enhancement of trust and confidence amongst the different European HE systems. Hence, the role of QA is instrumental in the development of a quality culture in HE and, although this process is far from over in the region, the influence of the ESG is continuously spreading and gaining acceptance as a key benchmark for all stakeholders in European HE. Thus, QA, whose ultimate goal is to enhance the quality of teaching and research in the public interest, constitutes a fundamental support for institutions in their ongoing development.

The current study notes that all stakeholders in the EHEA do have a shared understanding of QA, but then there are differences in perspectives and approaches. QA should be treated as yet an additional tool for fostering quality HE, so finding synergies and supporting collaboration amongst stakeholders are key channels for increasing efficiency.

For the time being, QA is timidly, at best, making its way on to the Cambodian educational agenda, so HEIs must rise to the occasion to start building a coherent, well-funded quality environment. Against this background, Cambodia institutions need namely the further development of consistent regulatory practices as well as greater support both internally and externally and transfer of good practices for the creation of solid and sound QA strategies and instruments.

A summary of the findings can be found hereunder.

QA framework at the university level

Significantly, a large majority of the sounded-out institutions recognised the existence of an institutional strategic plan or equivalent instrument, most of which include mission, goals and priorities.

In relation to the existence of an institutional QA policy statement, the PCUs presented a rather mixed picture. Generally speaking, most of them indicated to be endorsed by this instrument in some way. Even so, more than a third of the participating institutions indicated that they do not have a specific QA policy statement, and neither is it addressed in any other documents whatsoever.

As for the introduction of a QA system (or equivalent) in the participating HEIs, over a fourth of cases affirmed that this happened between 2000 and 2005 but in most cases it was introduced between 2006 and 2016. As a point of interest, 14% of the participants stated that they are currently designing or planning it.

On a separate issue, senior leadership (Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellors) is chiefly related to the role of decision maker when it comes to building a quality culture within their respective institutions. Additionally, almost half of the respondents alluded to the fact that it either monitors or takes the lead in the process.

A QA system (or equivalent) may be introduced via very distinct and diverse channels, i.e. based on a requirement of the national QA agency (as stated by almost three quarters of the participants) or on the decision of the institutional leadership (as stated by over half of the respondents). The cases in which the concept is a result of various consultation rounds amongst the academic and administrative staff of the institutions are the least frequent.

As regards the sort of structure that HEIs have in place to support the Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) processes, quite a number of options were highlighted by the participating HEIs, most prominently the existence of either a centralised IQAU or a specifically designated Pro-Vice-chancellor in charge of QA issues. IQAUs or committees at the faculty/department/institute level are not so common.

Regarding the existence of internal evaluation measures that provide feedback to the strategic planning in place, the resulting outlook proved to be rather heterogeneous. Over half of the respondents indicated that the institution is the one body defining a set of key performance indicators and follows its progress based on them. A rather small proportion of cases mentioned surveys at grass-root level conducted regularly by the institution.

On a separate issue, teaching and learning as well as a student support service are particularly highlighted by a vast majority of the respondents when asked about the activities covered by QA processes carried out in their respective institutions. Services to society, the least endorsed feature, is however identified by almost half the participants.

As for the processes that the PCUs have in place in order to ensure the quality of research activities, internal seminars where research projects and ideas are discussed proved to be the most common practice as indicated by over half of the universities. Conversely, other approaches such as internal and external peer reviews of research projects and key performance indicators amongst others are rarely mentioned.

With regard to the processes undertaken by the institutions to ensure the quality of the services to society, the use of questionnaires to key stakeholders is the most usual practice, as stated by 86% of the participating HEIs. Alumni feedback is also identified by more than half of the institutions. However, discussion forums or prior institutional approval for initiatives in this field are briefly mentioned by 14% of cases each.

QA practices

A vast majority of the participants (83%) indicated that QA architecture in teaching and learning is designed according to institution-specific protocols, although national QA frameworks and guidelines are followed. In the remaining cases, this instrument is tailor-made to the specific institution's needs and does not apply any ready-made model.

Formal QA processes carried out in HEIs involve different people and adopt different approaches. As it stands, leadership teams at all levels are the most engaged working group in this practice. External stakeholders, on the other hand, are the least involved in the process, followed by alumni.

With regard to the different means by which the aforementioned QA processes are undertaken, formal participation in governance bodies (where members are entitled to vote) proved to be the most commonly employed procedure altogether, particularly by leadership at the institutional level in the first place as well as at faculty/department/level. As an incidental note, it must be noted that there is a minimum proportion of the party concerned who is not involved in the aforementioned processes.

As for the manner in which the results of the student surveys are followed up, a large majority (83) of the PCUs indicated that the said results are chiefly taken into consideration when it comes to the design and revision of study programmes (including teaching methods) as well as to the assessment of teaching staff.

a Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and rewards

The entirety of the participating HEIs stressed that learning outcomes were specifically developed for some of the programmes.

Still on the subject, the aforementioned learning outcomes are generally publicly available through different means; they may be available upon request according to almost half of the participating HEIs or for students involved in each specific course, as mentioned by less than a third of the respondents in each case. Websites or study guides are the least preferred channels.

Regarding the ways to identify the students' workload needed in order to reach the described learning outcomes, the institutions actually use a series of varied mechanisms, such as that the teacher responsible for the module is the one person who estimates such a workload. Another recourse, although less frequently used, consists of asking all students in surveys about the workload they have for their courses. It must be noted that 13% of cases indicated that such mechanism is not included in the course description.

As regards the process for designing curricula and programmes amongst the participating HEIs, half of the cases affirmed that a working group, committee or equivalent is the entity responsible for their preparation. A third of the respondents alluded to the fact that a programme director (or equivalent person) is in charge of preparing the curriculum, which another third of the participants indicated that can be designed according to the staff members' proposals.

In the event of there being a working group, committee or equivalent in charge of the designing of the curricula and programmes, this chiefly consists of academic staff members, as identified by 83% of the participating HEIs. Other working groups or university bodies, such as external stakeholders, alumni, administrative staff, students, etc., were also alluded although to a significantly minor extent.

As for the type of processes that HEIs have in place for monitoring the curriculum and programme design, a vast majority of the PCUs indicated that their contents are evaluated continuously on an informal level. Conversely, as pointed out by 17% of cases, these instructional materials (including pedagogical approaches and intended learning outcomes) are evaluated as part of an external accreditation process.

In the same vein, when it comes to approving programme contents or curricula, the process is carried out chiefly at the level of the institution, as stated by almost half of the participating HEIs. As an incidental note, it must be noted that neither a governmental body nor any other external agency are involved.

As far as QA in doctoral studies is concerned, it is worth stressing that 83% of the participating HEIs owned that QA processes carried out within their respective universities do not include doctoral studies.

b Student assessment

In relation to students' assessment procedures which are currently carried out in the participating HEIs, the entirety of the respondents agreed that these serve as indicators of achievement of the targeted learning outcomes. Still, 80% of cases also mentioned that they have clear, pre-defined examinations as well as assessments conducted according to the institution's procedures and even regulations on student absenteeism. Evaluation criteria are rarely publicly available.

Regarding the information that students receive about the assessment procedures, the entirety of the PCUs indicated that is the teacher who informs the students about this question at the beginning of the course as well as about the criteria applied. Evaluation criteria is often publicly available through study guides or websites as well.

c QA of teaching staff

The entirety of the PCUs affirmed that students surveys are their preferred way to ensure that their teaching staff is qualified and competent. Still, other methods such as either formal national or specific requirements laid down by the institutions themselves and external accreditation processes are also taken into consideration, as indicated by almost two thirds of the respondents. As a point of interest, 20% of the participating HEIs indicated that certain teaching qualifications are required as well as compulsory pedagogical training.

A vast majority of the participants acknowledged that information on teachers' aptitudes and performance is not publicly available but kept confidential and available only at the leadership (institution/faculty/department) level. A fifth of the respondents indicated that it is indeed publicly available only for all those involved in QA procedures for teaching (including students).

d Learning resources and student support

Regarding the available learning resources, all the participating HEIs highlighted the existence of libraries and laboratories. Notwithstanding, computing facilities are usually offered and improved, as identified by 83% of the participants. Similarly, other learning facilities (such as language labs, musical instruments, etc.) are also offered according to a large majority. More often than not, human support (tutors, counsellors, etc.) are however generally overlooked.

It is noteworthy that 40% of the participating institutions owned that they have no processes in place for monitoring individual students' progression through an entire cycle. The remaining respondents affirmed that these procedures actually depend on each faculty/department/institute, so this practice is not standardised at the institutional level in any of the PCUs.

e Information systems

A small proportion of the participant universities did recognise to have a centralised information system that covers all key activities. Although this is not the case of a vast majority of the respondents, 83% of cases acknowledged the existence of certain information systems that exist at faculty level and, to a lesser scale, that the institution does have a centralised, non-integrated information system.

Regarding the type of data included in these information systems, the salient feature identified by two thirds of the PCUs is the profile of the student population (age, gender, educational background, etc.) and also, although to a lesser extent, the teacher-student ratio per faculty. Conversely, available learning resources and, when applicable, their costs are just mentioned by a small sample of the participating HEIs.

f Public information

As for the information that is publicly available on the PCUs' study programmes, the number of academic staff members is pointed out by the entirety of the participants. Still, the number of students involved in the programme, information of qualifications granted by the programme, information on the learning opportunities available to the students were also mentioned by a significant number of HEIs. As an incidental note, only a fifth of the respondents alluded to specific information targeting international students.

A large majority of the institutions (83%) alluded to the fact that information about the results of internal evaluations which are carried out in the participating HEIs is indeed disclosed to the public upon request, while in all other cases no information about these results is actually given. As to external evaluations, half of the respondents affirmed that the public is indeed informed upon request and a third answered in the negative.

A first-hand view

It follows from the above that, with a view to developing future strategies, further examination becomes necessary as for the implementation of a quality culture and the challenges that it poses in the context of HE in all the PCUs.

To begin with, all participating universities acknowledged the importance and the real need of the existence of a quality culture in their respective institutions. In the same vein, many of them highlighted the creation of a IQA Office or equivalent, in some cases even since the very establishment of the university itself. However, they have to contend with many organisational challenges in implementing the envisaged measures and structural reforms, particularly due to the lack of expertise and/or commitment of the various stakeholders involved at the institutional level. Thus, the lack of a sound and efficient QA-oriented training policy is yet another crucial factor to which most PCUs object. Furthermore, the IQAUs are usually understaffed and quite a number of their main functions and tasks often relies on the input of those responsible for QA-related issues at the different university faculties and offices.

On another level, some of the institutions involved in the present study also mentioned the difficulties they usually find in trying to adhere to both internal and external formal guidelines and standards, where they exist, such as the National Qualification Framework (CNQF) and QA agencies (i.e., the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, the ACC), as far as QA processes are concerned. This is chiefly due to the ever-changing local or national QA policies and the actual difficulties linked to the need for keeping duly informed and

staying abreast of their latest developments. Finally, the absence of an IQA manual is also cited by some of the participants as an impediment to an efficient implementation of QA practices.

4 QA FRAMEWORK AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Strategic plans

On the issue of whether the PCUs have an institutional strategic plan or equivalent instrument, a large majority of the institutions (71%) answered in the positive while the remaining 29% of the participating HEIs referred to other unspecified options.

QA policy statements

As far as the existence of an institutional QA policy statement is concerned, PCUs presented a rather mixed picture. Generally speaking, most of the PCUs (87%) affirmed that, one way or another, their respective universities are endorsed by this instrument. Although 37% of such cases did not elaborate further on this issue, 38% specified that they do not have a separate QA policy statement, but this is included in other types of documents, such as institutional mission statements, strategic plans, work plans or equivalent. For complete results, see Figure 1 below:

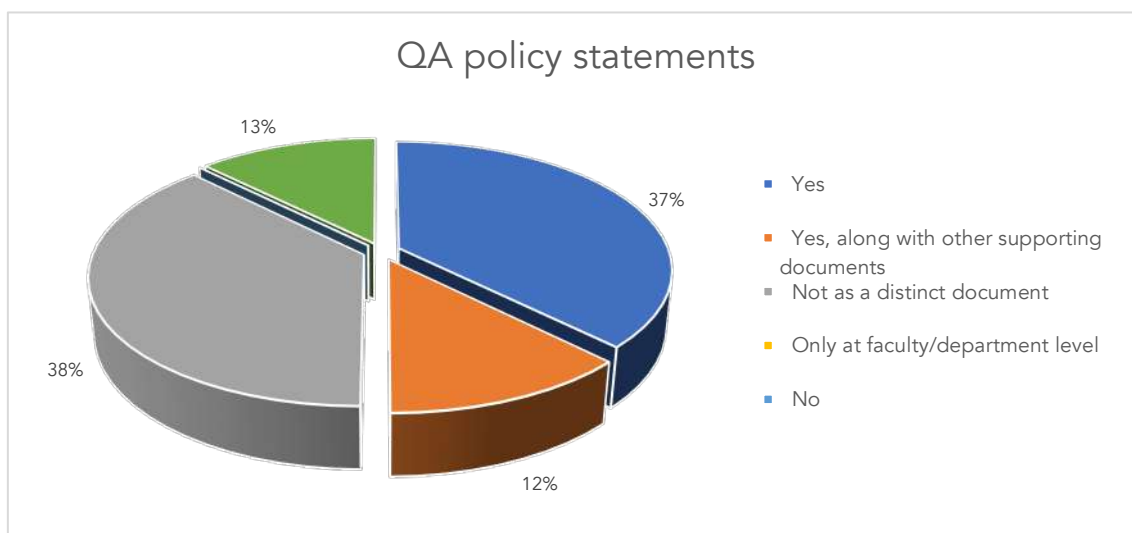


Figure 1: QA policy statements

More specifically, one of the respondents indicated that currently the accreditation mechanism regarding Institutional QA consists of 9 standards, namely strategic planning, management, teaching staff, student service, learning materials, physical facilities, financial resources and IQA.

Introduction of QA systems

As for the moment in which a QA system (or equivalent) was first introduced in the respective participating HEIs, over a fourth of the respondents (28%) affirmed that this happened between 2000 and 2005. Almost a third of the PCUs had their QA systems introduced between 2006 and 2010; the same applies to those between 2011 and 2016. Still, 14% of cases indicated that they are currently designing and/or planning it. Complete results are shown in Figure 2 below:

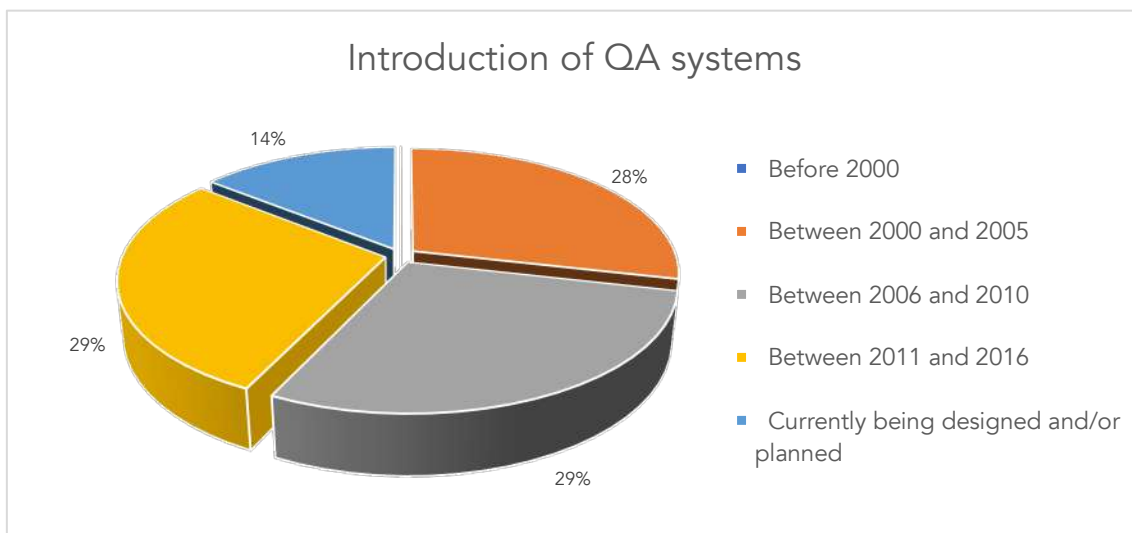


Figure 2: Introduction of QA systems

Senior leadership's involvement in QA

On a separate issue, senior leadership (Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellors) in building a quality culture within their respective institutions is pointed out as the decision maker by most of the respondents (71%). Additionally, more than half of cases (57%) alluded to the fact that senior leadership serves also as a facilitator for a better communication amongst different levels of the institutions, while 43% alleged that this leading figure either monitors or takes the lead the process in each case.

Additionally, one of the participating institutions noted that according to Standard nine, it is required that the HEI's management people or senior leadership offer strong support for IQA system.

How a QA system was introduced

As it has been manifestly noted, a QA system (or equivalent) may be introduced through very distinct and diverse channels. As stated by a large majority (71%) of the participants, the concept is based on requirement of the national QA agency which developed the standards and guidelines for this. This circumstance

is followed by the fact that the institutional leadership decided on the concept, provided instructions, training and support to the units to implement it, as stated by more than half (57%) of cases. On a lesser scale, the said concept is actually introduced as a result of various consultation rounds amongst the academic staff of the institution as well as through pilot projects conducted by some units (and good practices were disseminated based on these experiences) according to 29% of the respondents in either case. The remaining 14% of the PCUs indicated that the concept is a result of various consultation rounds amongst the academic and administrative staff of the institutions. For further detail, see Figure 3 below:

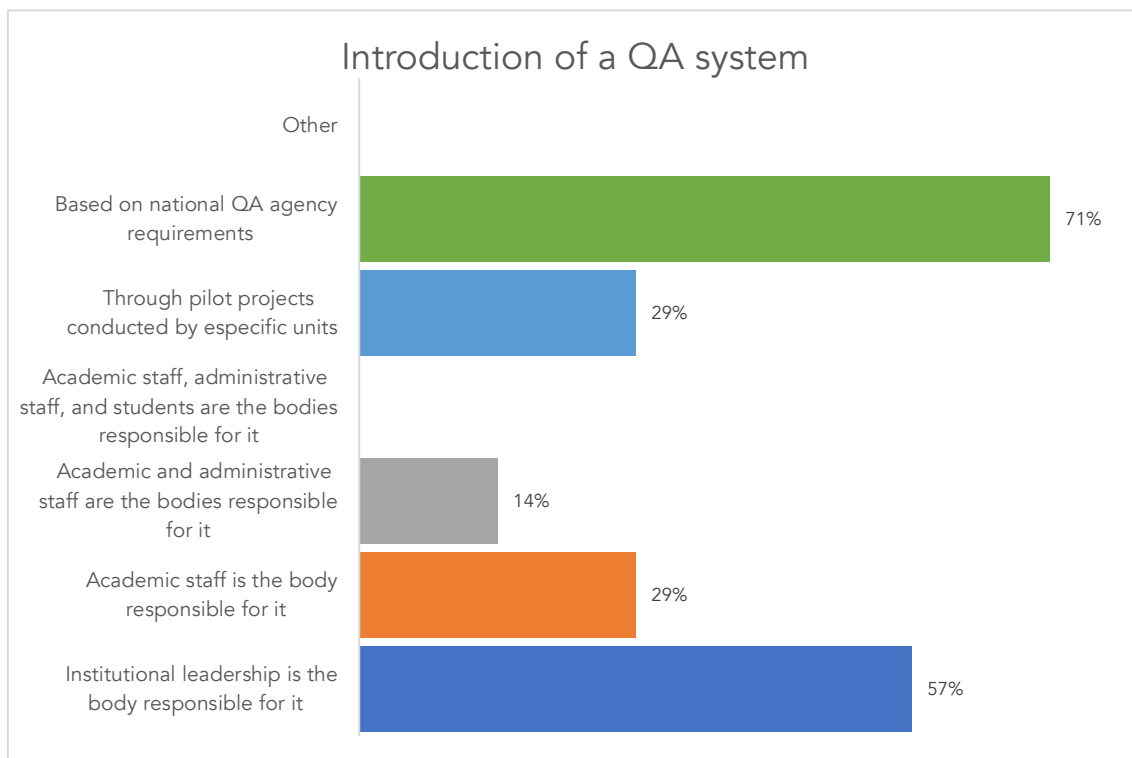


Figure 3: How a QA system is introduced

Internal structure in support of QA

As regards the sort of structure that HEIs have in place to support the IQA processes, the picture shown by the PCUs is once again quite diverse. Thus, amongst the options tabled by the survey concerned — such as the existence of centralised QA units with specialised staff and the Vice-Chancellor or a specially designated Pro-Vice-Chancellor being in charge of QA issues — are alluded to by most of the respondents, actually 71% of cases each. As a point of interest, 43% of the participants additionally indicated that there is a person in charge of QA within the Vice-Chancellor's Office; such is the case with both those indicating that there are contact persons or persons in charge of QA within their unit, who have also other responsibilities and those stating that there is an

institutional level quality committee or equivalent. Complete results can be found in Figure 4 below:

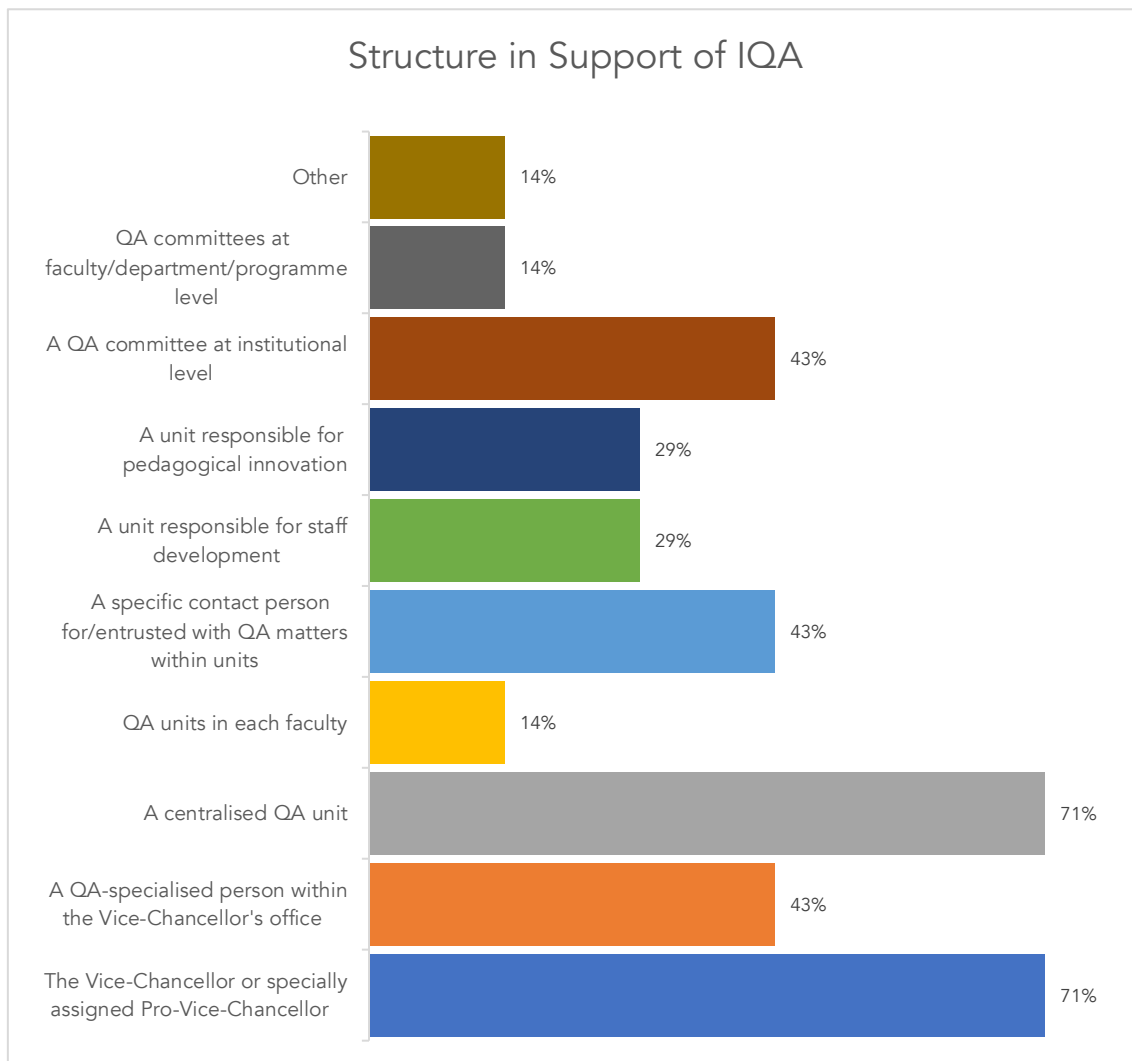


Figure 4: Structure in support of IQA

A further comment mentioned that the structure of the IQAU is not determined by the national standard. HEIs can apply a system that has a proper unit and structure or a team of IQA staff members. The ACC allows HEIs to organise their own IQA system as long as there is a responsible unit within HEIs.

Internal evaluations on strategic planning

When sounded out about the existence of any internal evaluation measures that provide feedback to the strategic planning in place, the picture shown by the HEIs concerned appears to be rather mixed and equally distributed. According to more than half (57%) of the participants, their institutions have defined a set of key performance indicators and follow their progress based on them. On a lesser scale, 29% of cases, also indicated that the institutional leadership

evaluates annually the progress made in terms of achieving the goals set by the institution. The same percentage of participants alluded to both the fact that the faculties (and/or relevant units) conduct regular self-evaluations to analyse their contribution to the achievement of institutional strategic goals as well as that the institutional strategy and the achievement of the goals set in it are revisited when the document is revised (every 3, 5 or N years). Further examples can be observed in Figure 5 below:

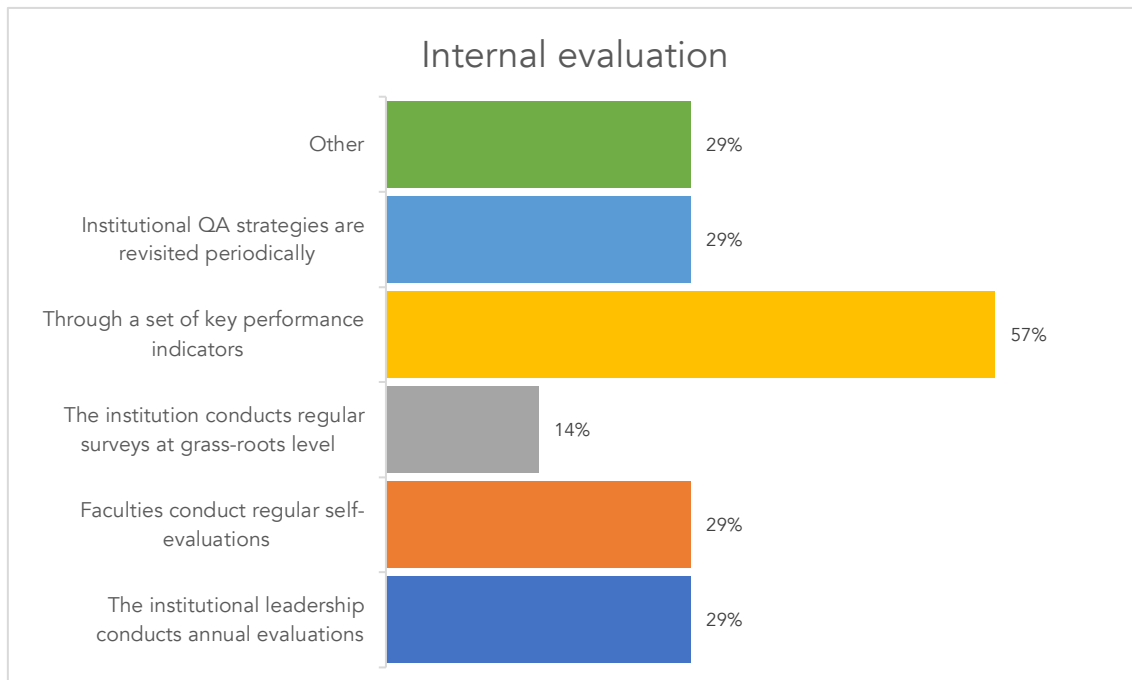


Figure 5: Internal evaluation

Moreover, one of the participating institutions mentioned that according to the Standard nine (IQA system), it is required that HEIs are to utilise the results derived for their self-assessment in order to improve their quality of education.

Activities covered by institutional QA

In terms of the activities covered by institutional QA processes carried out in the participating HEIs, teaching and learning, the most endorsed feature, is identified by 86% of the respondents. This is closely followed by the existence of a student support service, as indicated by 71% of cases. Other practices, such as governance and administrative services of the institution as well as research are both observed by 57% of the participants each. Finally, services to society total up to 43% of cases.

Additionally, one of the participants mentioned that the Standard nine of the ACC involves HEI's IQA system. This gives HEIs the right to use their own

standard of QA. However, HEIs' standard has to be, at least, aligned with the minimum requirement of the national standard.

Processes to ensure quality of research activities

With reference to the processes that the participating universities have in place in order to ensure the quality of research activities, the results have been many and widely varied as show in Figure 6 below. Thus, internal seminars where research projects and ideas are discussed, alluded to by 57% of the PCUs, have proven to be the most common practice. Internal peer review of research projects (including those organised by the institution, inviting external peers) as well as monitoring the impact factors of published articles and the use of key performance indicators defined for each research group (department or faculty) are observed in 14% of cases each. See Figure 6 below for complete results:

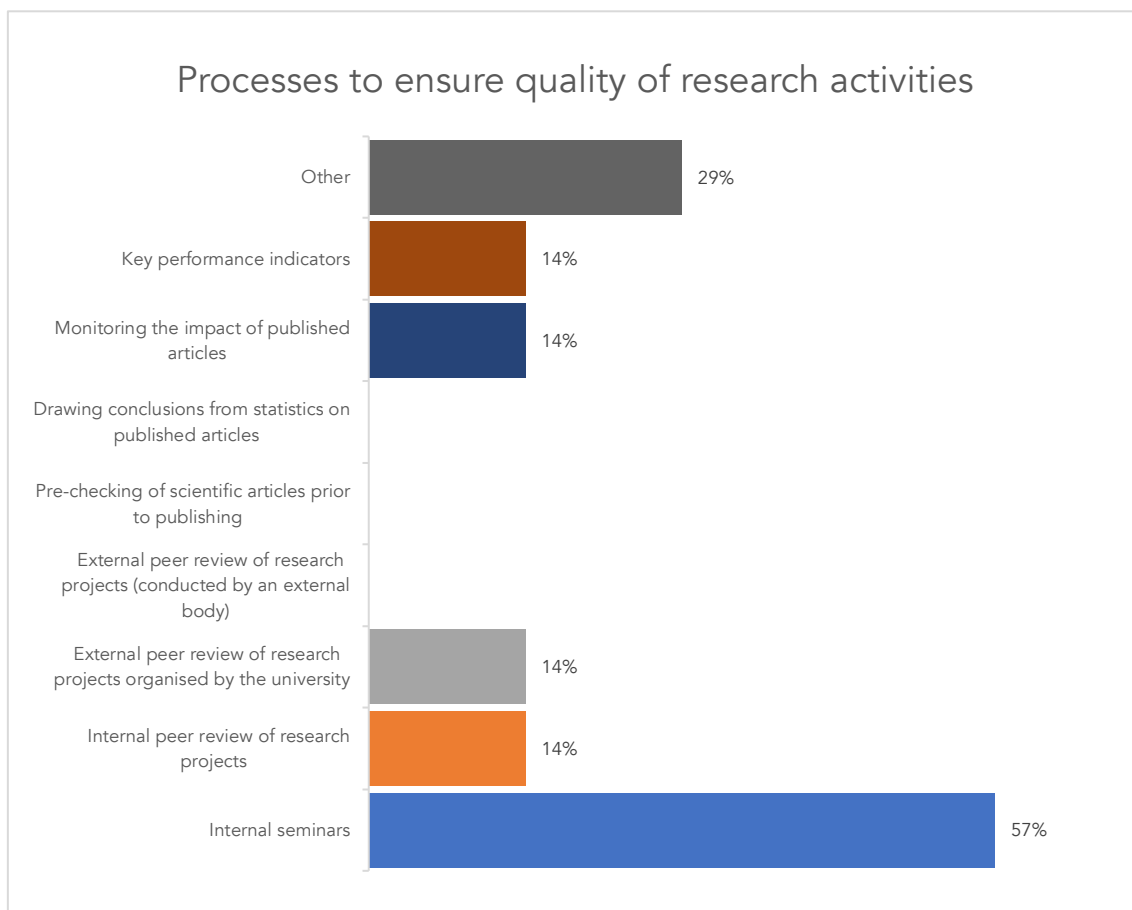


Figure 6: Processes to ensure quality of research activities

One of the institutions added that ACC's standards take also into account support for research projects, incentives for researchers, and HR for conducting research activities.

Processes to ensure quality to services to society

Once again, when examining the processes that PCUs have in place in order to ensure the quality of their services to society, the resulting picture turned out to be rather mixed. The use of questionnaires to key stakeholders is the most endorsed mechanism as indicated by 86% of the participant institutions. Alumni feedback through surveys or other activities of the like follow closely as stated by 57% of the respondents. Both monitoring the interactions with external stakeholders as well as the number of co-operation agreements account for 43% of cases each. Process descriptions of activities (guidelines or other descriptive formats) and the use of key performance indicators defined for each of the services are also referred to in 29% of cases each. For complete results see Figure 7 below:

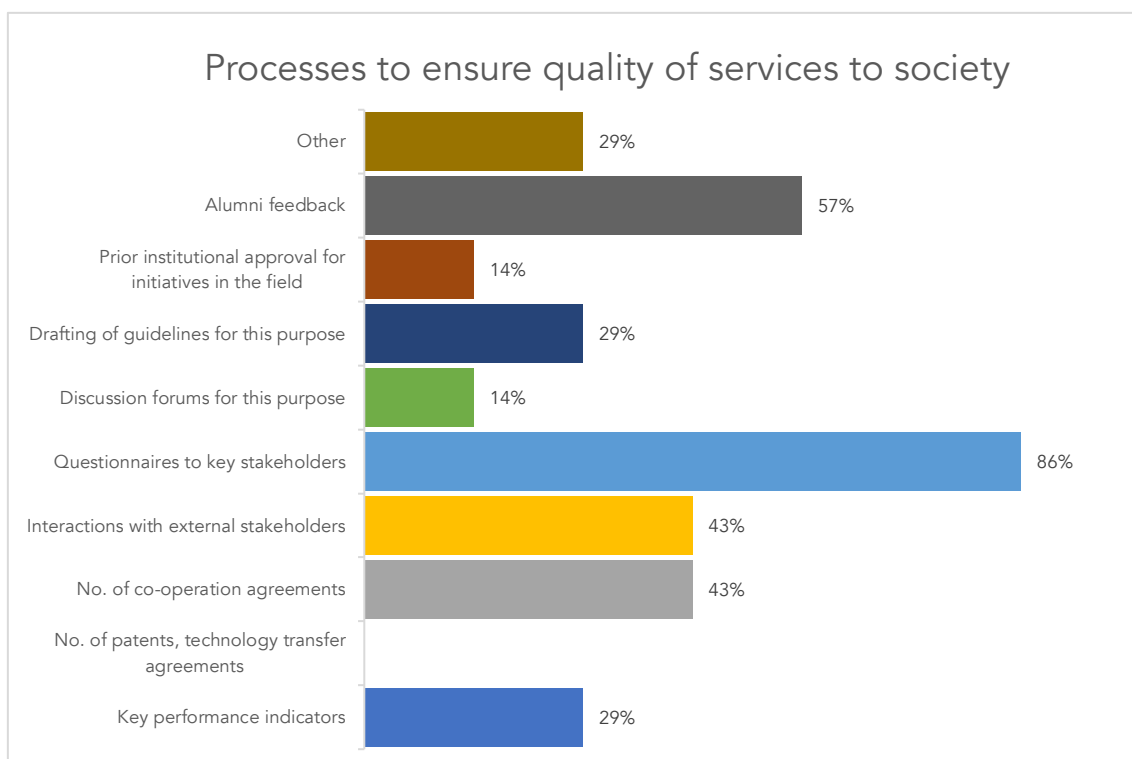


Figure 7: processes to ensure quality of services to society

Additionally, ACC's standard is highlighted for its role to cover societal service provided by HEIs at a macro level. The relevant standards are: Standard one: HEI's strategic plan must consider the national culture and identity, and Standard four: the program must consider the needs of the society.

5 QA PRACTICES

QA in teaching and learning

As far as QA architecture in teaching and learning is concerned, a vast majority of the respondents (83%) indicated that it is designed according to institution-

specific protocols, although national QA frameworks and guidelines are followed. The remaining 17% of cases acknowledged that this instrument is actually tailor-made to the specific institution's needs and does not apply any ready-made model.

QA processes institutional involvement

As it stands, formal QA processes carried out in the respective participating HEIs involve different people and adopt different approaches as shown in the Figure 8 below. Leadership positions (both at institutional and faculty/department levels) are the most engaged working groups in any of the processes. Administrative staff follows closely as well as academic staff, albeit on a lesser scale. External stakeholders (e.g., employers, experts, etc.), on the other hand, are the least involved in these processes.

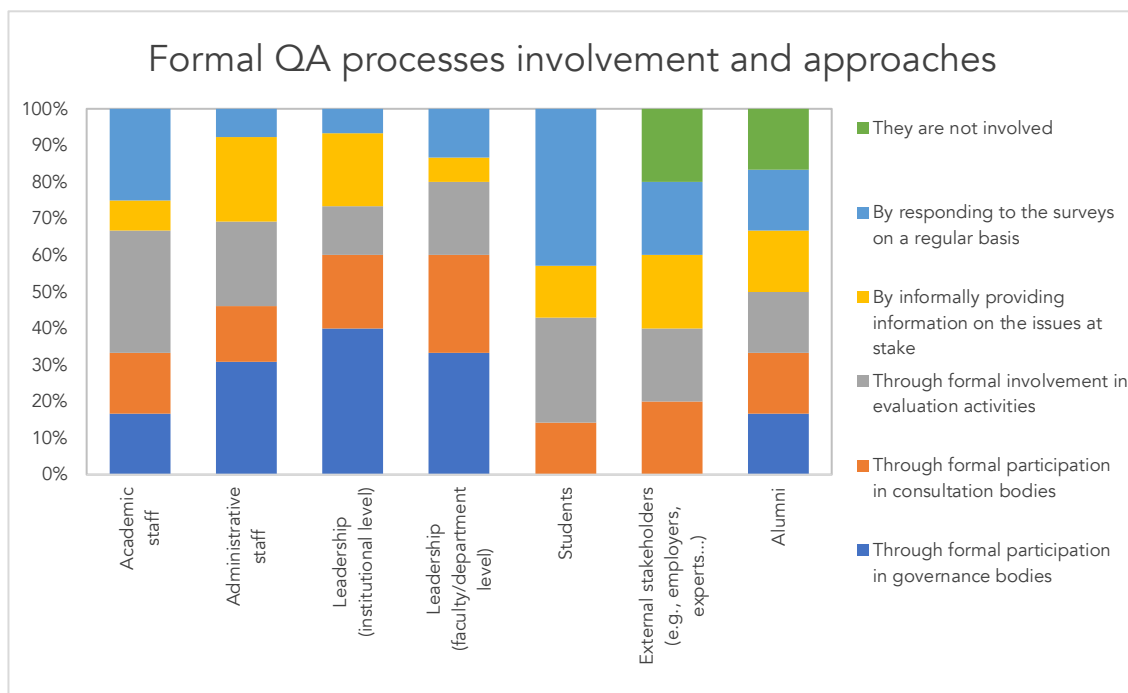


Figure 8: Formal QA processes involvement and approaches

As far as the different means by which these QA processes are undertaken, formal participation in governance bodies (where members are entitled to vote) proved to be the most commonly employed procedure altogether, particularly amongst leadership positions at the institutional level, followed closely by leadership roles at faculty/department level. As an incidental note, there is a minimum proportion of the parties concerned who are not involved in the aforementioned process (both students and external stakeholders), although this figure rises in the cases of administrative staff in particular and, to a somewhat lesser extent, of academic staff. The latter however are more prone to participate formally in self-evaluations or other evaluation activities, as indicated by two

thirds of the participating institutions, as well as in responding to surveys on a regular basis, according to half of the respondents. The former is indeed also the most common process amongst students.

Mechanisms to follow up students' surveys

The manner in which the results of the student surveys are followed up is in truth primal for a broader and conclusive evaluation. According to a vast majority of the PCUs (83%), these results are indeed taken into consideration in the design and revision of study programmes (including teaching methods). That was the same percentage when it comes to the assessment of teaching staff. In other instances, as indicated by two thirds of cases, the aforementioned results are archived (in order to inform future assessments of the programme/institution). These results may be also discussed in meetings attended by staff members and students organised specifically for this purpose and/or conveyed to students who have participated in the survey as well as the actions taken on the basis of such results, as pointed out by half of the participating HEIs in both cases. See Figure 9 below for complete results:

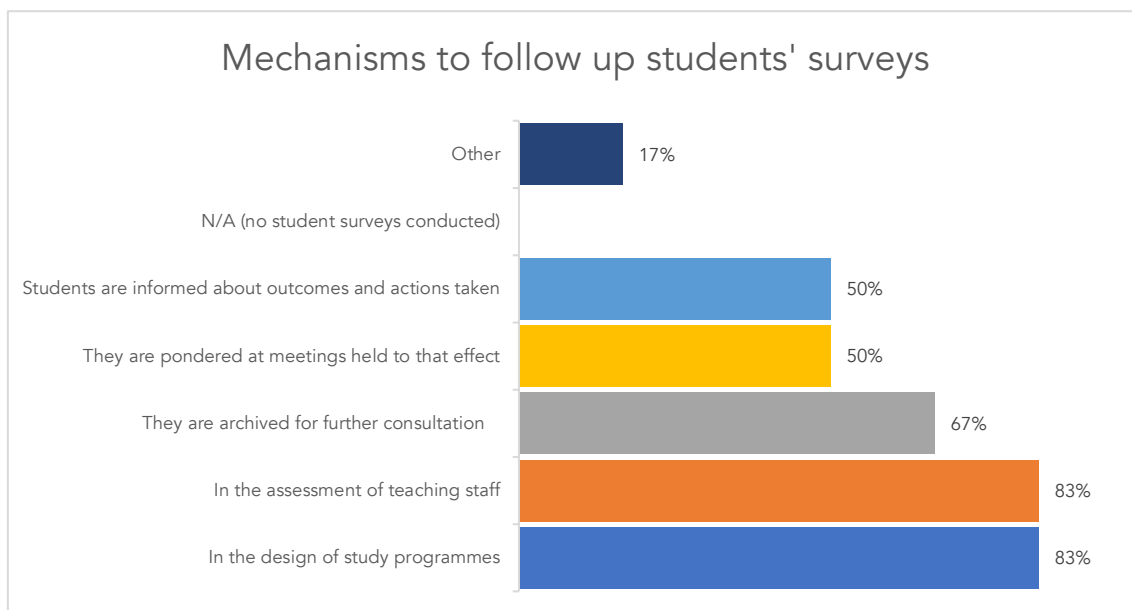


Figure 9: Mechanisms to follow up students' surveys

5. a Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and rewards

Explicit learning outcomes

When asked whether any explicit learning outcomes have been developed by the participating HEIs, the entirety of the respondents answered in the positive as regards those learning outcomes specifically developed for some of the programmes.

Availability of learning outcomes

In this vein, while the aforementioned learning outcomes are publicly available in general, there are various means through which these can be supplied, namely upon request, the most endorsed option as stated by 43% of the PCUs, or for students involved in each specific course, as mentioned by 29% of the respondents. Still, those publicly available on the website, study guides or equivalent account for only 14% of cases. Other additional options were not specifically pointed out.

Mechanisms to be aware of students' workload

When it comes to identify the students' workload needed in order to reach the described learning outcomes, the institutions actually use a series of varied mechanisms. In the first place, 38% of the respondents indicated that the teacher responsible for the module is the one person who estimates such workload. Another recourse which is also frequently used, as affirmed by 25% of the PCUs, is asking all students through surveys about the workload they have for their courses. The same results are drawn from the practice in which it is just a sample of students that are consulted. The remaining 13% of cases indicated that there is no student workload indication in the course description:

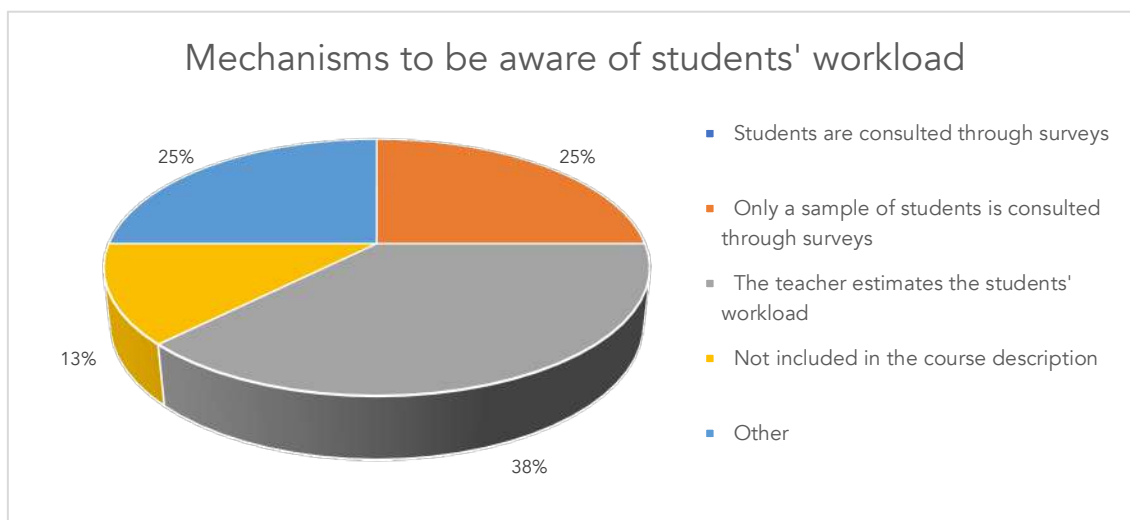


Figure 10: Mechanisms to be aware of the students' workload

Curriculum design

With regard to the processes employed for the designing of curricula and programmes implemented within the PCUs, there is an array of different procedures as shown in Figure 11 below. However, according to half of the respondents, the most commonly used practice consists of a working group, committee or equivalent preparing the curriculum (possibly based on proposals prepared by others). Secondly, as indicated by a third of the participants in both cases, the final curriculum may be the result of either a combination of the

proposals submitted by each staff member – which are based on what they find essential for the programme – or that the programme director or equivalent person is the one person responsible for preparing it after which staff members may comment the draft. Thus, the corresponding ministry or any other external bodies have no standing with regard to this practice:

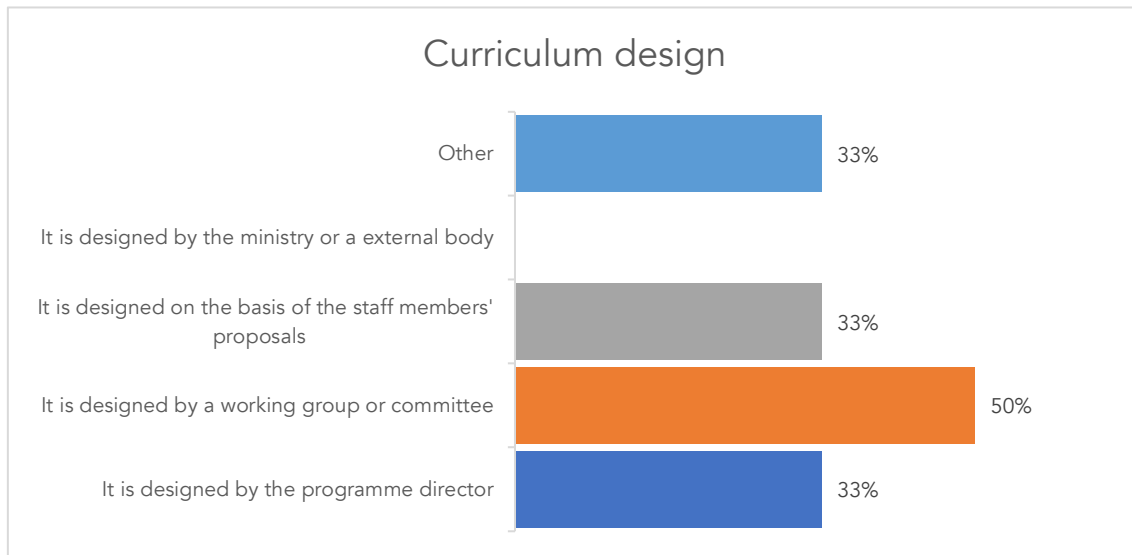


Figure 11: Curriculum design

Curriculum working group

In the event of there being a working group, committee or equivalent in charge of the designing of the curricula and programmes, a vast majority of the participating institutions (83%) owned that such a group consists, chiefly, of academic staff members. Other working groups or university bodies were also alluded to as follows:

- External stakeholders (employers, corporate partners, etc.): 50%
- Administrative staff members: 17%
- Alumni: 17%
- Other: 17%

As an incidental note, it must be noted that students are not involved in this process.

Curriculum monitoring

As for the type of processes that HEIs have in place for monitoring curriculum and programme design, most of the respondents (83%) indicated that the curriculum and programme contents are evaluated continuously on an informal level (discussions between staff members, staff and students, etc.). This practice as well as pedagogical approaches and intended learning outcomes are

evaluated on a regular basis (every N years/semesters, etc.) according to a third of the respondents, while 17% of cases stated that these are evaluated as part of an external accreditation process or equivalent. See Figure 12 below for complete results:

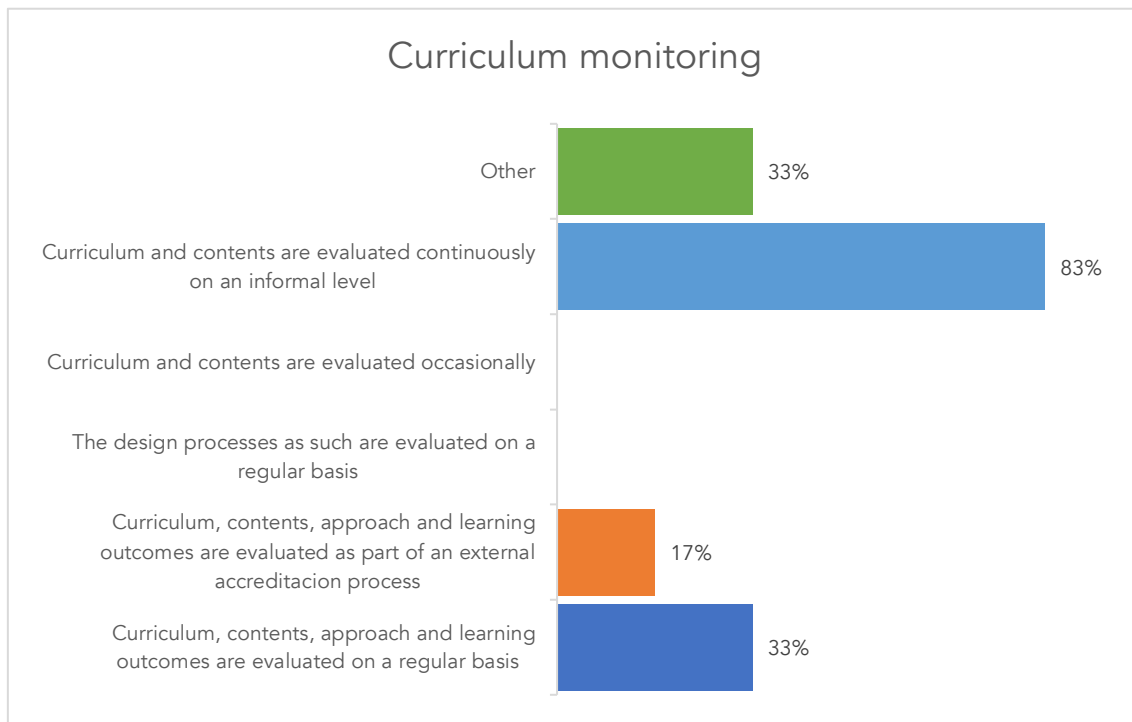


Figure 12: Curriculum monitoring

Curriculum approval

Still on the subject, when it comes to approving programme contents or curricula, the process in question is carried out chiefly at the level of the institution, as stated by 43% of the respondents; at the faculty level, according to 29% of the respondents; or at the departmental level, conforming to 14% of the PCUs. On the other hand, neither a governmental nor any other external bodies (agency or other) are involved in this procedure.

Inclusion of doctoral studies in QA

Delving deeper into this issue, when asked whether QA processes carried out within the PCUs do include doctoral studies, a vast majority of the participating institutions (83%) answered in the negative. Of those who did acknowledge that this practice is implemented at their institutions, 17% indicated that this happened at the level of the institution as a whole and the same percentage indicated that it was so as part of QA for teaching.

5. b Student assessment

Characteristics of students' assessment

As for the students' assessment procedures (i.e., examinations) which are currently carried out in the participating institutions, the entirety of the respondents agreed that these are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives. A vast majority of the respondents (80%) also indicated that they have clear, pre-defined examinations or other assessment methods in place as well as clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances. The same percentage applies to those who affirmed that these mechanisms ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the institution's stated procedures. Finally, 20% of cases acknowledged both that they have clear and publicly available criteria for marking/giving grades as well as that the administration checks that the assessments procedures are followed:

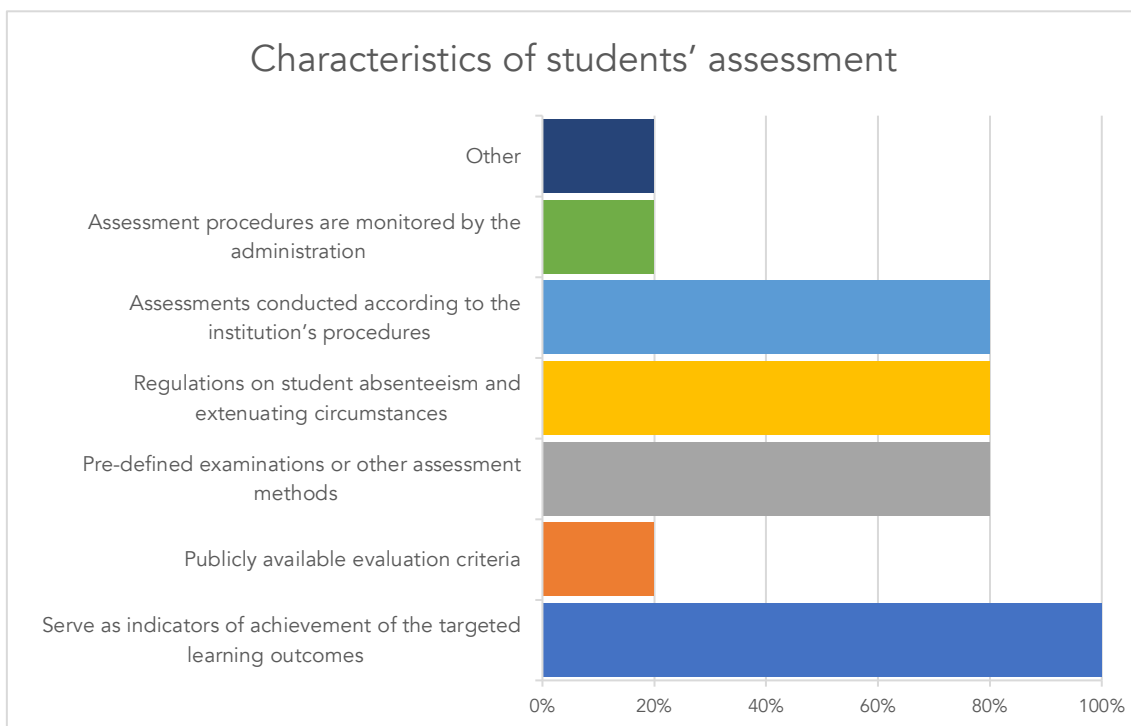


Figure 13: Characteristics of students' assessment

Students information

Regarding the information that students receive about the assessment procedures, 100% of the respondents affirmed that the teacher informs the students about this issue at the beginning of the course as well as about the criteria applied. On the other hand, 40% of the participating institutions also indicated that the assessment methods and criteria applied are publicly available via study guides, website and the like.

5. c QA of teaching staff

Teaching staff QA

On the question of in what way PCUs ensure that their teaching staff is qualified and competent, the answers were certainly many and varied. The entirety of the respondents agreed that student surveys are conducted in their respective institutions. Additionally, a number of other practices appear to be frequently taken into consideration as well when recruiting teaching staff, namely formal national requirements for the competence of teaching staff, specific requirements of the institutions themselves for competencies of permanent teaching staff, an external accreditation process of the teachers (conducted, for instance, by a QA agency or a national body) and certain processes to remove a teacher from his/her duties if they continue to be demonstrably ineffective, each of them accounting for 60% of cases. Optional pedagogical training organised for teachers and a peer feedback system are somewhat regular practices as well, as stated by 40% of the participating PCUs. As a point of interest, 40% of the respondents also alluded to the fact that their legal framework does not foresee the possibility of removing an ineffective teacher. For complete results, see Figure 14 below:

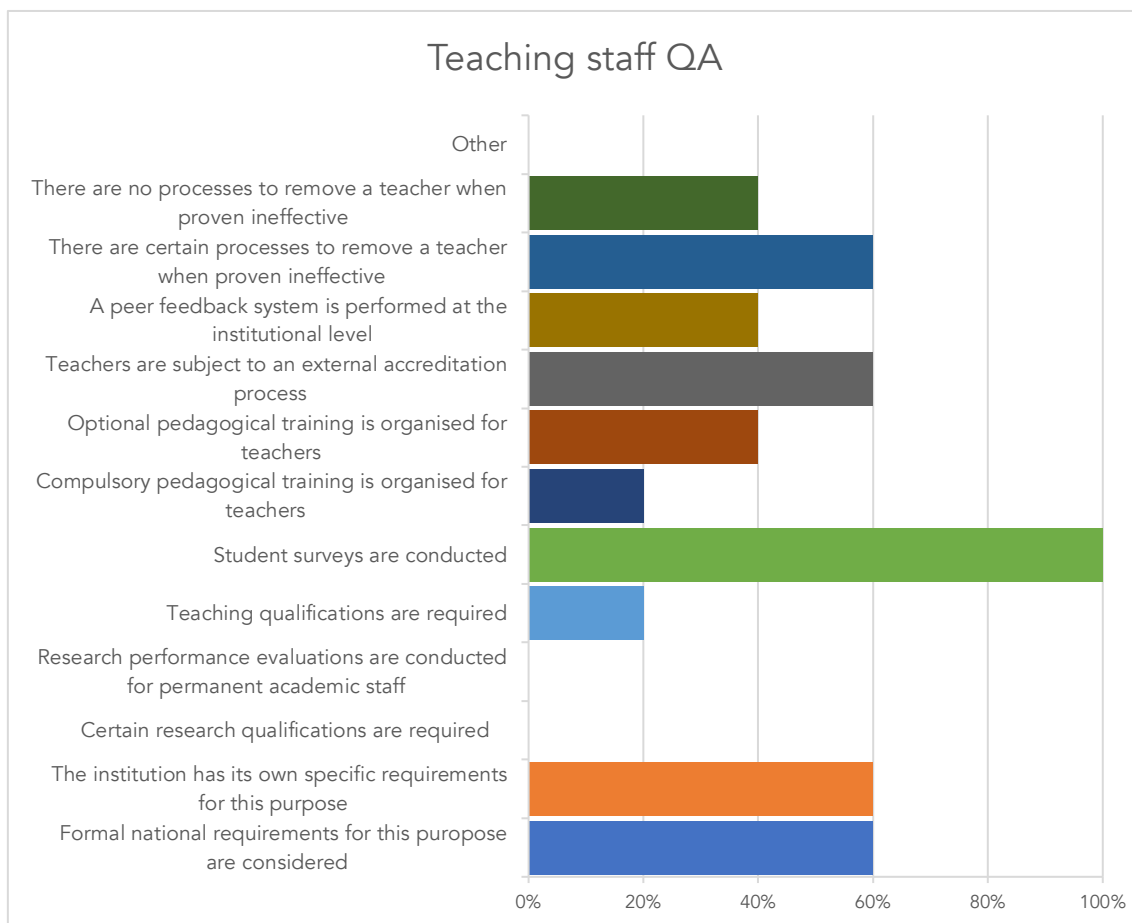


Figure 14: Teaching staff QA

Availability of information on teachers' evaluation

As for the availability of information on teachers' aptitudes and performance (results of student surveys, evaluation of his/her teaching aptitudes...), a large majority of the respondents (80%) acknowledged that this is not publicly available but kept confidential and available only at the leadership level (institution and/or faculty and/or department). The remaining 20% affirmed that this information is indeed publicly available for all those involved in QA procedures for teaching (including students).

5. d Learning resources and student support

Management of learning resources

When it comes to considering the management of the learning resources available at the participating institutions, most of the tabled options are indeed offered, the most noteworthy resources being libraries and laboratories (identified by 100% of the PCUs in both cases) and both computing facilities and learning facilities (language labs, musical instruments, etc.) as indicated by 83% of cases as well. Computing facilities were also amongst the most improved resources according to 83% of the respondents, followed by libraries and laboratories, as stated by 67% of cases each. However, human support (tutors, counsellors and other advisers) in addition to teaching staff are by far the least available resources: occasionally offered and/or improved, scarcely monitored and barely evaluated. For complete results, see Figure 15 below:

	Offered	Monitored	Evaluated	Improved
Library	100%	67%	50%	67%
Computing facilities (including email account and internet access)	83%	50%	33%	83%
Human support (tutors, counsellors & other advisers) in addition to teaching staff	50%	33%	17%	50%
Laboratories	100%	50%	33%	67%
Learning facilities (language labs, musical instruments, any other material used for classes...)	83%	50%	33%	50%

Figure 15: Management of learning resources

Individual students' progression monitoring

When asked whether there are processes in place for monitoring individual students' progression (i.e. information relevant to the progression of particular students during their studies) through an entire degree cycle, 60% of the PCUs

affirmed that the internal QA procedure regarding this depends on each faculty/department/institute, that is to say, there are no internal QA procedures standardised at the institutional level. The remaining 40% of the respondents answered in the negative.

5. e Information systems

Information systems

When asked about the existence of an overarching information system (i.e. databases) in the PCUs which is used for the effective management of their activities, only 17% of the respondents indicated that their respective institutions do have a centralised information system that covers all key activities. Thus, the remaining 83% of cases answered in the negative; 60% of these owned that that several information systems do exist at faculty level and the other 40% of such cases pointed out that their respective institutions do have a centralised, non-integrated information system (data on different activities are not gathered in one data warehouse).

Information included in the system

Still on the subject, as far as the type of data gathered in these information systems is concerned, the foremost feature identified by the PCUs was the profile of the student population (age, gender, educational background, socio-cultural background, etc.), as pointed out by 67% of the respondents. Half of the participating institutions also mentioned students' progression and success rates. To a lesser extent, factors such as the teacher-student ratio per faculty/department/institute, tracking graduates' employment and students' satisfaction with their programmes were also mentioned by a third of the respondents each. For complete results, see Figure 16 below:

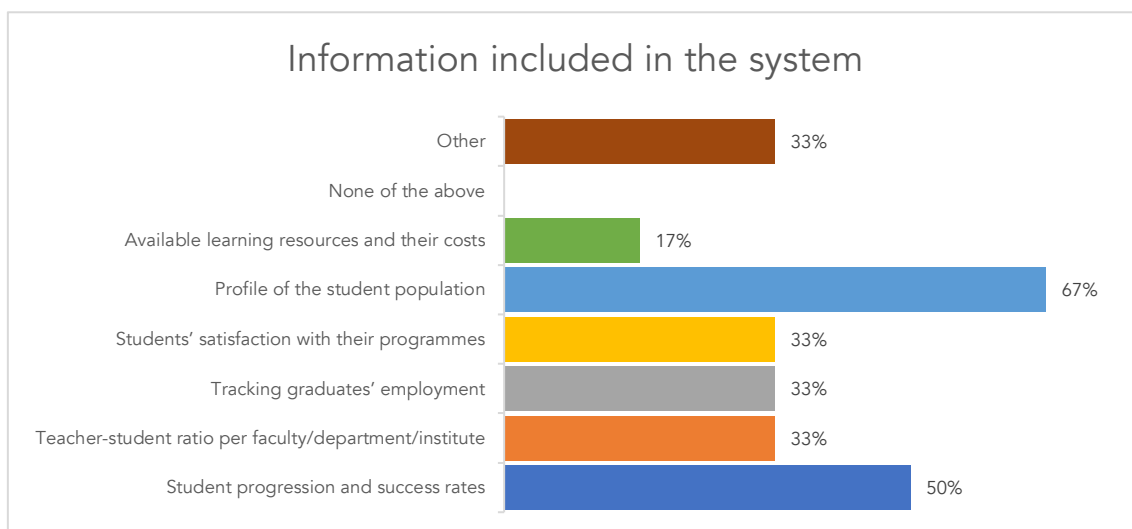


Figure 16: Information included in the system

5. f Public information

Public information

As regards the information that is publicly available on the PCUs' study programmes, the number of academic staff members involved in the programme is alluded to by the entirety of the respondents. The number of students currently involved in the programme, information of qualifications granted by the programme as well as information on the learning opportunities (e.g. traineeships, exchange programmes, mobility possibilities, scholarships...) available to the students of the programme follow closely as stated by 80% of cases each. Other relevant data such as information on the intended learning outcomes of the programme; the teaching, learning and assessment procedures of the programme; and alumni employment account for 60% each. At the other end of the spectrum it should be stressed that specific information targeting international students is just mentioned by 20% of the respondents. See Figure 17 below for complete results:

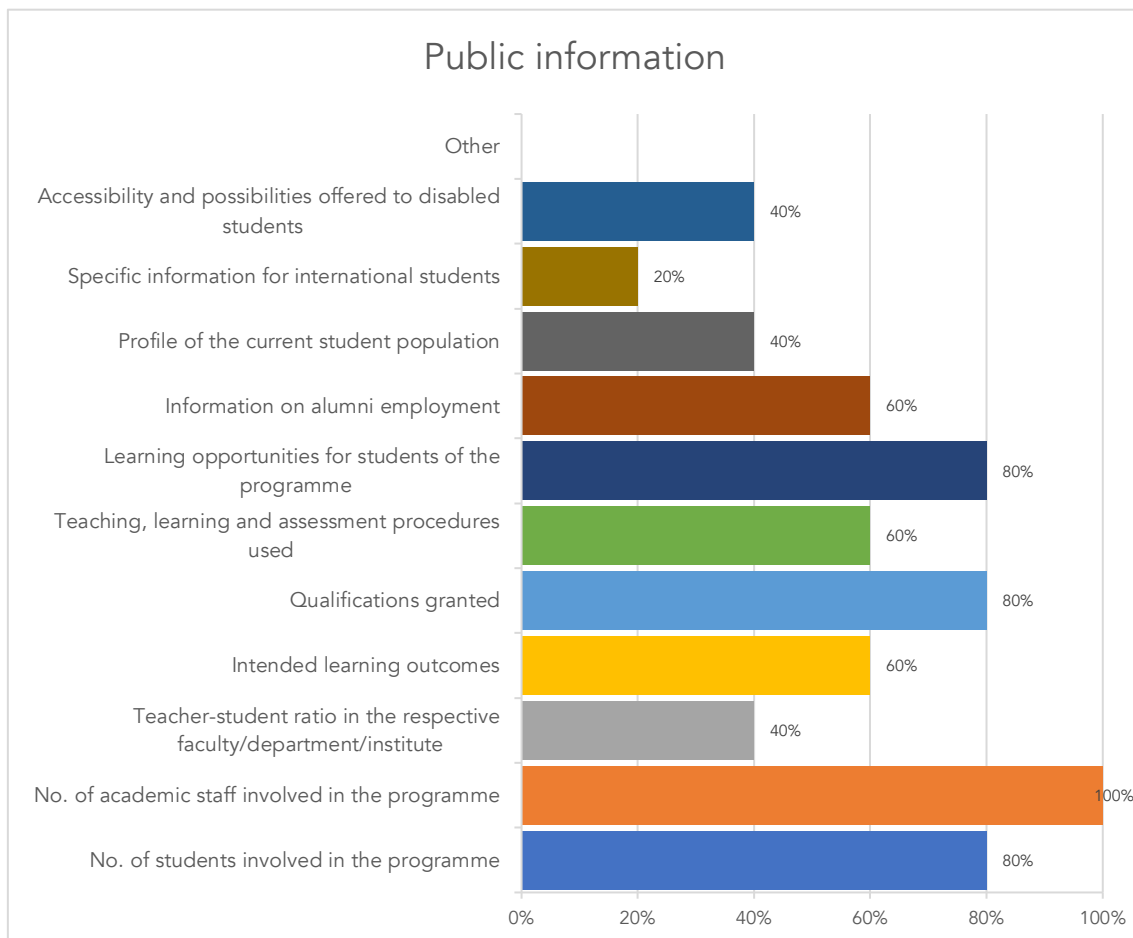


Figure 17: Public information

Channels of information

When asked whether participating institutions inform the public about the results of evaluations carried out, a distinction must be made between results of internal and external evaluations. As for the former, a large majority (83%) of the respondents alluded to the fact that information is disclosed upon request and the remaining 17% indicated that they do not inform about these results. As to the latter, i.e. results of external evaluations, half of the participants affirmed that the public is indeed informed when asked and a third of the PCUs answered in the negative.

6 A FIRST-HAND VIEW

Additionally, PCUs were invited to provide any further comments which they might consider relevant in order to give a broader picture of the current panorama of the QA practices in their respective institutions. This section offers thus an overview of the PCUs' perception as to their existing QA practices and challenges to be addressed.

6.1 Implementation of a quality culture

One of the PCUs acknowledged to have created an IQA process for self-evaluation in order to ensure teaching quality in HE. Additionally, feedback from stakeholders is to be systematically sought and provided to faculties and other university units in order to enhance the institutional development. The IQA requires then a strong commitment and involvement from all stakeholders involved in the QA processes.

The implementation of the quality culture and the IQA at another participating university seems to be limited due to its recent establishment. The IQA Office at the university is staffed with employees from other offices who change constantly, which keeps the IQA Office running slowly. The Office is not run smoothly either since a strong involvement from all faculties and offices in the university is needed and some faculties do not fully cooperate with the IQA office in the proper submission of the required documents. As a matter of fact, faculties and other units – even the head of the IQA Office – do not actually have good knowledge and skills on IQA. Moreover, the Office is indeed understaffed. On the other hand, IQA policies have also been continuously changing and training regarding the strengthening of IQA is rarely conducted for all stakeholders involved in QA at the university. People responsible for QA processes work

separately without any shared goals or knowing clearly when the IQA activities will be done.

Another of the participating universities affirmed that they are committed to creating a 'Culture of Quality' and adopting an 'accountability and transparency' approach. In response to the University's purpose, a Quality Assurance Centre (QAC) is set up to assist and advise the governing board as well as leadership and management teams, focusing on a strategic and rigorous academic quality approach. The QAC's function is aligned with the university's vision and mission and plays a significant role in assuring high standards of achievement in teaching, research and community service through improving monitoring systems, conducting self-assessments and preparing for the national, regional and international assessment and accreditation processes. The QAC works in cooperation with all departments, offices, and units of the university not only regarding assessment and accreditation, but also with the aim of enhancing the quality of the academic programmes. The QAC also works closely with an academic committee and acts as the university internal academic and managerial quality consultant in such a way that academic quality meets regional and global standards.

One further university claimed to be one of the HEIs in Cambodia which has taken part in the implementation of a quality culture since it was founded as they consider that QA plays an important role in ensuring the quality of students and graduates in HE. They were even granted provisional accreditation since its inception and after that full accreditation was granted twice in a 3-year cycle by the ACC. They were also recently selected amongst 30 HEIs in Cambodia for a pilot assessment. Thus, the IQAU, which was staffed with personnel from the Department of Foundation Year, was founded. The University has also designed its own IQA process for self-assessment. However, the operation of the IQAU does not work well due to internal politics and needs strong involvement from all faculties and offices in the university. IQA does not rely exclusively on the IQAU but on all faculties, offices, and stakeholders as well.

As stated by another participating institutions, the implementation of a quality culture and internal QA process requires competent enablers who deeply understand the process and procedures and bring together the relevant staff members for the relevant meetings. These meetings are chaired by the head of the institution, who informs about the necessary activities to be taken and assigns the procedures and other requirements. The head of the institution will comment on and approve the proposed activities, procedures and resources for the implementation of a quality culture and the IQA process in the university.

Although quality culture is part of yet another of the universities involved in the present study since its creation, they indicated that QA practices seem to be lacking as there have been difficulties in understanding and implementing the CNQF and the External Quality Assurance Agency. However, the Acting Head of IQA Office has started to develop and strengthen their IQA system, including quality culture, to ensure their teaching and learning practices, processes, and outcomes align with the job market. In short, quality culture needs to permeate all staff involved and the IQA process needs continuous implementation.

From the ACC perspective and observation, quality culture and internal quality have improved significantly. Almost all HEIs have their own IQA system. They also have their own QA manual for implementation. In addition, based on the summary report of the pilot assessment (2018), all 54 HEIs have completed and implemented the national standards with an average of 70%: strategic plans, management, board, curriculum development committee, sufficient teaching staff, library, student services, and an IQA system. However, some technical aspects such as curriculum development and research activities, financial resources, quality of HR, quality of physical facilities and study materials vary hugely amongst HEIs, especially between public and private HEIs and between those located in urban/city areas and those in provincial areas, a gap which could hamper the consistent quality culture and QA all over the country.

6.2 Challenges to improve QA

In order to achieve the university's strategic plan, QA is a very convenient matter to discuss for one of the institution's management team. They strongly believe that evaluation methods, HR, and training courses will be the challenges to address regarding the implementation of a quality culture and IQA processes. Actually, the management team, offices, faculties, teachers, students and stakeholders are key players to improve QA in the university. Hence, it is important to improve the collaboration amongst the IQA staff and the offices and faculties. In addition, the development of QA training courses is yet another challenge in the QA process since education policies are constantly changing from year to year, so an update of QA concepts is needed to advance their QA process. Most importantly, the assessment and evaluation techniques are part of challenges to be faced regarding the implementation of a quality culture and IQA processes in their institution.

A second participating university affirmed that IQA and quality culture are frequently discussed at the university meetings at all levels. However, budgetary

shortages are a pressing issue as for the implementation of the QA process. It is also important to note that their IQA Office is understaffed; there is only one person dealing with documentation in the office. This does not include the planning and the implementation of workshops and other IQA-related activities such as monitoring and evaluation. Shortage of staff at the office reflects the shortage of expertise, making it difficult to effectively meet the IQA standards in due course. It is also crucial to have a strong participation from all faculties and offices, which is actually quite limited because of time constraints; their teaching and learning activities as well as management tasks within their units are a priority. The changes in IQA structures and policies at the ministry level are also problematic; they really affect their support for the IQA Office at the university level and, although IQA is admittedly a significant factor for a quality education, only a few training activities are provided, which cannot help the university to follow the changes in IQA policies.

The challenges posed in implementing QA processes at another of the participating institutions are deemed to be many and varied: involvement of stakeholders, knowledge of quality management, capacity building in QA research, awareness of QA values, inaccurate academic planning and poor publication in labour market research amongst others. One of their most pressing priorities is to formulate and design the expected learning outcomes as well as the course competency of each field so that these are aligned with the CNQF. Basically, budget allocation is a major issue when it comes to improve quality management at the university level.

For one of the universities involved in the present study QA is not a new word but a new task with a view to achieving their vision, mission and goal. QA has become an active discussion topic for the university management board; they believe that there will be many challenges to address regarding the implementation of a quality culture and IQA processes such as HR, IQA manual, assessment tools and proper training. Having competent staff from faculties and offices is their first challenge since QA does not come from the IQA Office but from the management board, faculties, offices, teachers, students and other stakeholders. It is important to note that team work and collaboration amongst university staff and staff of the IQAU is not fully working because staff in each faculty and office already deal with both administrative and academic tasks in their current positions. Furthermore, the shortage of staff and the limited knowledge and skills in QA of the IQAU staff and the internal assessors are significant problems too. Besides, the lack of an IQA manual is another challenge when implementing their QA practices; it is not published yet, which prevents their QA mechanisms from working properly since it is unclear what the required

assessment tools are. Moreover, a continuous – and necessary – QA training is also a part of the challenges they must face in this regard; QA approaches may constantly change due to the national centralised policy, making it really difficult to keep up with the latest developments, which definitely has a negative impact on their QA work and process.

As stated by a further participating university, the future challenges to be faced regarding the implementation of a quality culture and IQA processes are the requirements and guidelines amended by the government and competency of IQA staff members. Since the IQA has been developed, it requires the person in charge and relevant staff members to improve their capacities in order to catch up the progression of IQA. Cooperation with the private sector is very important to them because the university has to develop its curriculum programme to match the market needs. Therefore, the private sector plays a key role to reflect the skills and specialisation that are highly needed.

The future challenges of another of the participants lies in the way that the different communities involved participate in the IQA process. In recent years, it appears that almost all the institutions are misunderstanding the IQA process and the quality culture concept; they often regard it as a threat rather than as an improvement. With this, all the stakeholders involved in QA practices end up sharing that view. So, transforming this perception into a that of positive change about quality culture within HEIs might be the biggest challenge.

The future challenges faced by the ACC might involve the whole system/stakeholders in the QA community and its economic impact. First, the lack of sufficient and holistic stakeholders might slow down the quality culture. As per sub-decree, the National Supreme Council of Education guides, liaises and steers relevant stakeholders to common goals and interests. However, this body ultimately does not perform as expected. This deficiency may lead to a number of hindrances such as misunderstanding amongst stakeholders (e.g. Cambodian Higher Education Association (CHEA), ACC, DHE, etc.), conflict of interest, over-lapped goals and responsibilities of authorities amongst public agencies and, ultimately, weak community practices and interests. More importantly, the lack of professional bodies is also problematic; professionalisation of QA-related staff is required for licensing, advising and acknowledging HEIs' programme contents and graduates' capabilities and competencies. Finally, the economic impact such the low income per capita (which could lead to fewer opportunities and motivation to attend HEIs), urbanisation, lack of government taxes to finance the public educational sector, lack of HEIs' income to finance and offer quality educational services as well as

the movement of workforce and students into Phnom Penh (which could be hazardous for provincial HEIs although they have a good and functional IQA system and quality culture in place) might misguide the whole education service and quality to completely different expected outcomes.

Annex 1. ACRONYMS

Acronyms used in this report are explained where they first appear in the text. For convenience, these are summarised here in alphabetical order:

ACC: Accreditation Committee of Cambodia

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CNQF: Cambodia National Qualification Framework

DHE: Department of Higher Education

EHEA: European Higher Education Area

ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ESG: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (also known as the European Standards and Guidelines)

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

HEQCIP: Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project

HR: Human Resources

IQA: Internal Quality Assurance

IQAU: Internal Quality Assurance Unit

MoEYS: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport

PCU: Partner Country University

QA: Quality Assurance

QAC: Quality Assurance Centre

Annex 2. REFERENCES AND MATERIALS

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