Guidelines for Building an Internal Quality Assurance Unit

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I. Why an institution of higher education needs to develop a system of Internal Quality Assurance?

Quality Assurance is the primary responsibility of higher education institutions. An Internal Quality Assurance system is established by the institution itself to coordinate a number of processes that guarantee that the educational provision it offers is of high quality and that show that the institution is committed to continuous quality enhancement. For this purpose, an institution needs to design a fit-for-purpose Internal Quality Assurance system that supports the development of quality culture and ensures the achievement of its strategic goals through an evidence-based approach to Quality Assurance. Hence, an Internal Quality Assurance system aims at establishing and systematically guaranteeing a cycle that includes the definition, implementation, assessment, evaluation, and improvement of Quality Assurance processes in academic activities, research, governance, administration, or resources **(Figure 1).** Moreover, this systematic approach centered on "a process and outcome-based methodology" serves to inform the decision-making body at the institution to respond to the changing needs and priorities in all institutional functions operating from the "bottom-up" and "top-down" for the sake of continuous improvement.

In this perspective, building an Internal Quality Assurance Unit is at the core of the Internal Quality Assurance system, and its activities must facilitate the application of Quality Assurance measures at the institution.
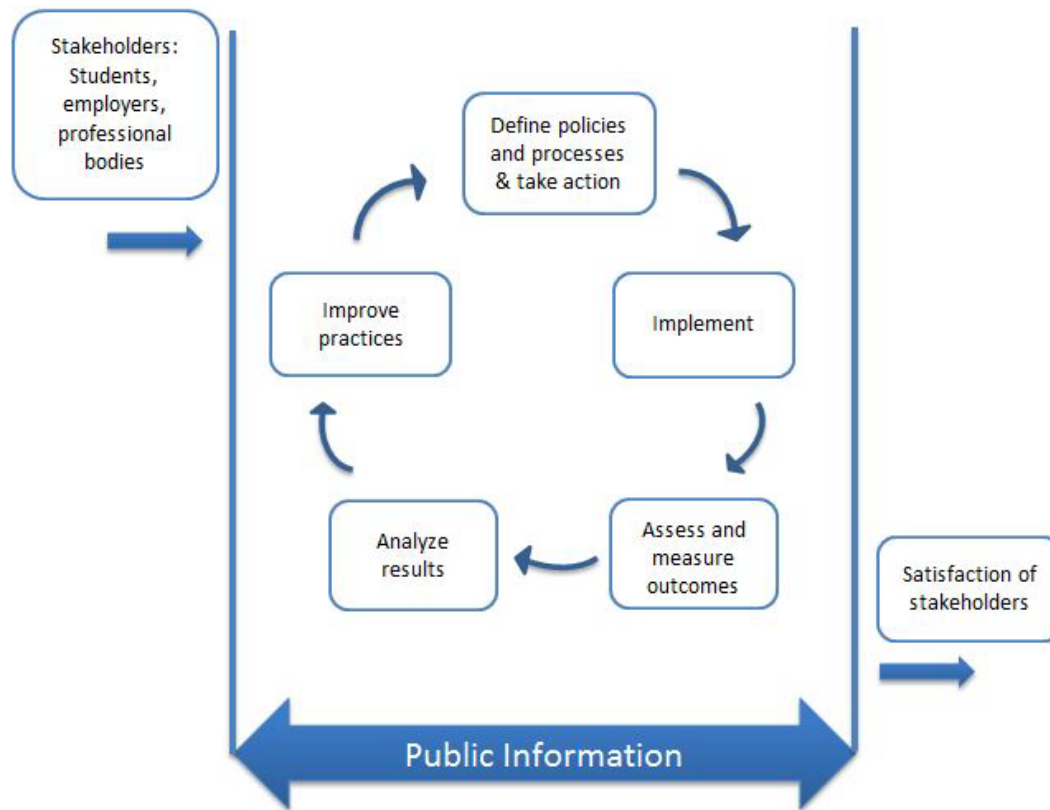
Figure 1.Cycle of Quality Assurance *(adapted from an original ANECA diagram)*

II. What are the two key characteristic features of a system of Internal Quality Assurance?

The institution needs to design an Internal Quality Assurance system that is:

1. Inclusive
2. Sustainable

An effective Internal Quality Assurance system must engage stakeholders or the ensemble of actors that influence the university's behavior, direction, processes or outcomes. Internal stakeholders such as students, Faculty members, management, administrative and technical staff as well as external stakeholders represented by alumni, potential employers, professional bodies, or national authorities shape the concept of quality in higher education institutions, because of the feedback they convey to the institution to undertake efforts in

improving "education services". Hence, although the "top management" at the institution may define the policies and priorities, "grassroots" actors at the institution (bottom-up approach) as well as the stakeholders from the socio-economic fabric must be involved in multiple aspects of the Quality Assurance framework. Faculty members or supporting staff serve as the direct implementers of Internal Quality Assurance policies and procedures, students and alumni are regarded as participatory partners in the management of the learning experience, while employers, alumni, professional bodies, and society at large represent the end users of the qualifications offered by the institution.

An effective internal Quality Assurance system must be sustainable through internal Quality Assurance procedures that can be conducted electronically to avoid excessive manual processing and administrative overload.

III. What are the main activities covered by a system of Internal Quality Assurance?

1. Governance
2. Administration
3. Communication flow within the Institution
4. Research
5. Teaching and Learning
   a. Program Review
   b. Program and Course Learning outcomes
   c. Quality of Teaching Staff
   d. Assessments
6. Student Support Services
   a. Processes: Registration, advising, counseling, health center, food services
   b. Resources: Library, Labs, Computing facilities.
7. Civic Engagement

IV. How an Internal Quality Assurance Unit is set up?

Administratively, a Quality Assurance Unit is at the core of any Internal Quality Assurance system. Commitment of the institutional governance to the formation of an Internal Quality Assurance Unit is a key principle in its conception and effectiveness. The governance of the institution officially commits itself to designing a system of Internal Quality Assurance via diffusing a document that acknowledges the importance of building a Quality Assurance Unit and its role in improving the institution and its activities. Then, the provost appoints a director to lead and manage the Internal Quality Assurance Unit.

The Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU) should be an independent entity that reports directly to the provost to circumvent lobbying and interference from Deans of Faculties. The director of the IQAU can be appointed for a period of 3 years, but the appointment can be subject to renewal. The director should be a senior academic faculty member with a proven expertise in internal and external Quality Assurance measures, knowledge about the organizational culture of the institution, recognized at the national level by Internal Quality Assurance Unit directors, and an expert evaluator.

Moreover, the director of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit reports directly to the provost, and all action plans devised by the Unit are subject to approval by the Provost prior to implementation within the institution.

V. The Internal Quality Assurance Unit

Goals

1. Establish an Internal Quality Assurance system with a mission and vision statement and a fit-for-purpose Internal Quality Assurance policy that is made public and updated periodically.

2. Develop, maintain, and follow a Quality Assurance Manual that describes all institutional academic and functional structures and operations for the planning and implementation of Quality Assurance processes.

3. Support, promote, and foster Quality Assurance measures within the institution to steer it towards quality enhancement through the institutionalization of best practices.

Structure of an IQAU

The organizational set-up of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit *(Figure 2)* is represented by:

1. The Unit Director

2. The strategic committee

3. The operational team

4. The Projects teams

The strategic committee led and managed by the Director is formed of 8 members representing institutional steering efforts in Quality Assurance measures, priorities, and improvements in Governance, Research, Teaching and Learning, Assessment, Follow-up on Internal Quality Assurance projects at the level of Faculties, Departments, and Units, Internationalization, Resources, and Civic Engagement. The strategic committee is appointed by the Provost upon discussion of the credentials of the committee members with the Unit Director. Members of the Strategic Committee comprise senior academic and non-academic university professionals, who have demonstrated excellence in their field of expertise, ability to work within a team, knowledge about the institutional strengths and weaknesses in terms of Quality Control, and commitment to serve the University.

The strategic Committee represents "the Internal Quality Assurance system governance" in terms of the preparation and production of institutional documentation and statistical data to the institutional governance, as well as to internal and external stakeholders, and evaluation or accreditation agencies. The strategic committee led and managed by the Director is also the component of the Internal Quality Assurance system that customizes the institutional Quality Assurance action plan for approval by the Provost.

The action plan shall specify for instance:

1. The QA objectives and processes.
2. The targeted stakeholders.

3. The fields of application of the system of IQA.

4. The operational processes of the system of IQA.

Once the action plan has been approved by the Provost, the director of the Quality Assurance Unit signals the execution phase of the action plan. The outcomes of the action plan are also evaluated by the strategic committee under the leadership of the Director.

Functions of the Steering Committee under the Leadership and Management of the Unit Director (Figure 3)

1. Preparation and production of the annual institutional self-Study Report.

2. Management of the External Evaluation Processes and Accreditation. The Internal Quality Assurance Unit is a liaison between the Institution and the Evaluation and Accreditation Agencies.

3. Coordination of all Quality Assurance related activities within the Institution.

4. Monitoring of all Quality Assurance related activities within the Institution and sounding the alarm in case of specific risks and problems.

5. Dissemination of information on institutional Quality Assurance key indicators to internal and external stakeholders.

6. Providing expertise in the interpretation of the National and/or International requirements and guidelines in Quality Assurance in order to adapt them to the institutional context and ensure their embedding in the institutional Quality Assurance mechanisms.

7. Initiation and support of the preparation of Faculty self-Study Reports for institutional review or external evaluation.

8. Providing support and expertise to Faculties and Departments. The Internal Quality Assurance Unit guides Faculties in in their operations to develop quality programs with appropriate targets and goals.

9. Management of systematic collections of reports on Faculties and institutional performance in order to be analyzed and included in the institutional report to determine whether a trend in the institutional performance is emerging or changes are occurring in the environment within which the institution is operating. For instance, data analysis on:

   a. Admissions rate, requirements for a program entry, effective enrolment rate

   b. Pass and drop-out rates/program/cohort

   c. Student feedback via programs and course evaluations

   d. Assessment of students outcomes and achievements

   e. Research productivity/program/Faculty

   f. Tracer studies: Employment rate of graduates within 6 months of the degree

   g. Physical, financial, and human resources/program/department/faculty

   h. Institutional strategic plan, institutional and Faculty by-laws and regulations

   i. Benchmarking to compare the practice and performance of the institution with similar institutions

   j. Ranking at the national, regional, and international levels

   k. Surveys of students, graduates, and professors and their results

10. Professional development and training on Quality concepts and/or Quality Assurance processes and procedures for academic and non-academic staff.

The operational team is made up of representatives from all Faculties and Institutional units. However, these individuals are recognized as legitimate professionals with the know-how in steering change in professional behavior and practices within their work environment. The operational team is selected by the Director of the Unit and represents an "expression" of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit at the Faculties, Departmental, and unit levels in the institution. The operational team reports to the strategic Committee.

The operational team ensures the following tasks **(Figure 3):**

1. Preparation and production of the Faculties, Departments, or Units self-assessment reports with their supporting documentation to be submitted to the strategic committee.

2. Preparation and production of the programmatic self-assessment reports with their supporting documentation to be submitted to the strategic committee.

3. Monitoring of the implementation of the Quality Assurance action plan of the strategic Committee.

4. Communication of the Quality Assurance measures and dissemination of Quality Assurance awareness.

5. Sharing of best practices at Departmental levels within Faculties.

6. Promotion of training of Faculty members on topics related to quality assurance.

7. Engagement in institutional and national initiatives related to quality assurance.

In some Internal Quality Assurance Units, 2 to 3 members of the Operational Team may be part of the Strategic Committee.

The Projects teams are appointed by the Operational Team. They aim to assist the Operational Team in "Self-assessment" design and documentation, implementation of the Quality Assurance improvements identified by the Strategic Committee, and may be involved in the evaluation of their outcomes. The Projects Teams report to the Operational Team **(Figure 3).**The size of a project team depends on the scope of the task and the extent of resources needed to achieve it. Projects teams are dissolved by the Operational Team once the task is over.

The Provost shall provide an appropriate office space to house the Internal Quality Assurance Unit (Director and Strategic Committee) and allocate physical resources and a secretarial staff to efficiently support the Unit work.
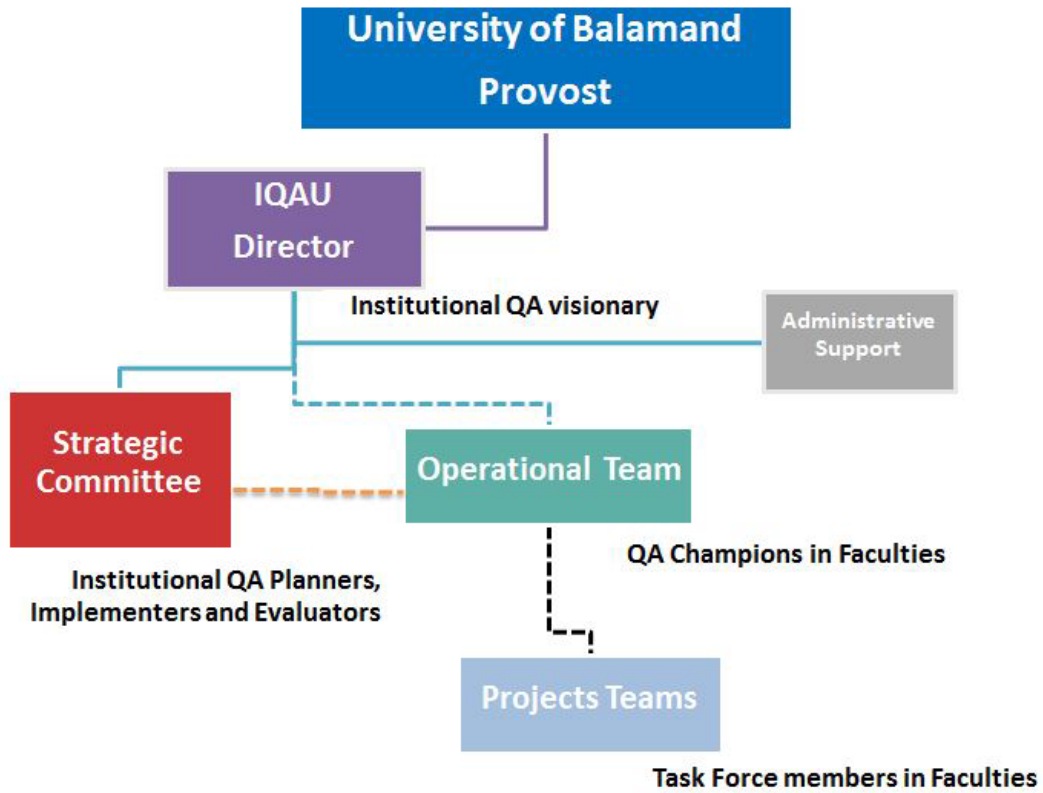
Figure 2.Organizational Chart of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU)

IQAU Director	Strategic Committee	Operational Team	Projects Teams
• Define the Mission and Vision statement of IQAU • Promote and foster evidence based institutional QA measures and directives • Establish an Institutional QA system (IQA policies and procedures) • Define QA key strategic goals, deliverables and timelines • Manage QA Programs and Evaluate the operational effectiveness of QA initiatives • Lead efforts for the development of a QA Manual • Lead the Strategic Committee in its functions • Coordinate and Report to the Provost	• Define the institutional QA Action Plan • Prepare the annual institutional report • Coordinate, monitor and evaluate institutional QA initiatives • Disseminate institutional QA Key Performance Indicators to internal and external stakeholders • Coordinate and Report to the IQAU Director	• Produce Faculties/Departments/ Units/Program self-assessment reports • Promote Quality Best Practices at Faculties levels • Engage in institutional and national QA Initiatives • Coordinate and Report to the Strategic Committee	• Execute QA initiatives set by the Operational team • Assist the Operational Team in "Self-assessment" report design and documentation • Coordinate and Report to the Operational Team

Figure 3.Main Functions of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU)

VI. Concluding Remarks

1. The present guidelines for the building of an Internal Quality Assurance Unit were customized to fit the University of Balamand's own context, realities, resources, and cost effectiveness, hence, fit for the purpose to:

    a. Promote a quality culture with emphasis on institutional improvement

    b. Fulfill external requirements for Quality Assurance

2. The present guidelines propose a Unit for Quality Assurance that reports to the Provost. At AUB and LAU, the Internal Quality Assurance System is assumed by the Offices of Institutional Research and Assessment whose Directors also report to the Provosts.

3. The proposed Internal Quality Assurance Unit will launch and evaluate Quality Assurance initiatives at the Other Campuses of the University.

4. Internal Quality Assurance Units are the mechanisms by which institutions engage in critical "self-evaluation" and "self-regulation", hence, an evidence-based audit process.

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VII.   References

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