



## REVIEW ARTICLE

## Faculty Engagement in Internal Quality Assurance of Academic Programs: A Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

Faculty engagement has a close relationship with the internal quality assurance (IQA) of academic programs and program success since faculty participation significantly impacts the continuous quality improvement of teaching and learning. However, dramatic challenges revealed in a review of the literature indicate faculty resistance to this process. The purpose of this review of published articles is to learn about the strategies to engage faculty in the quality management of academic programs. Based on a thematic and content analysis of published articles three major categorical areas emerged: Resources, IQA model and recognition and rewards. The knowledge gained from this analysis has implications for international higher education at three levels: ministry of education and training, accreditation agencies and higher education institutions. The implementation of identified practices would foster the movement of the quality assurance process toward continuous quality improvement.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The literature shows that faculty members play a significant role in students' learning performance. The requirements from external stakeholders such as the department of education and accreditation agencies to provide more evidence of student success upon their graduation place increased pressure on the higher education institutions (HEIs) (Ewell, 2009). In addition to providing evidence of student success, such as the graduation rate and the employment rate, HEIs have had to provide evidence of student learning outcomes (Gaston, 2014). This new requirement has shifted the program outcome assessment from "checking off the list" to engaging more faculties in the internal quality assurance (IQA) process to discuss assessment results of student learning across the programs and then make appropriate changes to improve the quality of academic programs. The IQA process provides faculty with valuable opportunities to reflect on their teaching and how they have used the assessment results to make improvements in the program learning outcomes. Continuous quality improvement is the most important step to indicate the best IQA practices (Suskie, 2009). It is also a significant indicator to demonstrate effective IQA to external stakeholders such as accreditation agencies and education administrators.

However, the literature identifies some grand challenges that occur during the IQA implementation process such as cumbersome IQA processes, additional workload (Cardoso et al., 2019) and no direct impact on quality improvement (Vukasovic, 2014). Significantly, faculty resistance to participating in the IQA process was commonly discussed in the literature. Meanwhile, some literature emphasized that lack of faculty commitment might have a negative impact on the effectiveness of IQA of academic programs. With the tougher requirement in quality management and more accountability to external stakeholders for sharing evidence of student success, faculty engagement and commitment to the IQA process is indispensably essential. Multiple types of research in the literature shared the positive contribution that faculty engagement in the IQA process makes to the continuous improvement

of academic programs, especially the program learning outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this thematic analysis of literature was to review higher education policies, accreditation standards and published international research related to strategies for engaging faculty in the IQA of academic programs to sustain the quality of academic programs and to draw out some specific implications for international higher education.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides fundamental information about the IQA of academic programs such as definition and purposes, the IQA faculty engagement model implemented around the world, the challenges to engage faculty in the implementation process and the best practices to engage faculty to improve the IQA of academic programs.

### 2.1. IQA Definition and Purposes

IQA comprises the intra-institutional practices used to monitor, evaluate and improve the quality of higher education (Martin, 2017; AUN-QA, 2020). From this definition, IQA is highly contextual and can be different across institutions, nations and disciplines (Martin, 2017). UNESCO conducted an international survey on IQA and about 80% of participants responded that the purposes of IQA were for institutional performance assessment, institutional learning, improvement of academic activities, improvement of management, equitable resource allocation, compliance with external standards, and accountability to government and society (Martin, 2017). This finding aligns with the common definition for the IQA process. In the U.S, higher education institutions have been required to conduct an assessment to provide accountable evidence of student learning to stakeholders. The term “assessment” in the U.S. is similar to that of quality assurance (QA) (Fuller, Henderson & Bustamante, 2016). The most important component of the IQA process is to align assessment results with resource allocation for continuous quality improvement.

### 2.2. IQA Faculty Engagement Model and Implementation around the world

When analyzing UNESCO’s eight case studies of the implementation of IQA around the world, all eight institutions provided information on IQA structure, IQA instruments and the assessment of the IQA process. First, to promote IQA activities across the institutions, they developed official documents to guide the IQA activities such as quality assurance manuals/policies, quality handbooks/manuals, quality assurance policy and a quality assurance framework (Martin, 2017). Second, institutions created QA offices and QA committees at the institution, college and department levels to implement the QA activities. Some institutions had a center to be responsible for QA activities such as center of higher education development and quality enhancement, center for quality assurance (CQA), institutional research (IR) and academic planning or quality assurance and accreditation center (Martin, 2017). In the U.S., the IR office and office of assessment are in charge of QA activities. Depending on each institution, these functions are either in the same office or separated into two offices.

To support the IQA activities, most institutions also have IQA committees to oversee the IQA activities such as providing feedback on the IQA process and activities and communicating the IQA results to internal and external stakeholders. The members of this committee include administrators, faculty and staff from across the institutions. Noticeably, all eight UNESCO cases emphasized that institutional and specialized accreditation or EQA and audit served as an important external conditioning factor for the effectiveness of the IQA system. This finding was consistent with the National Institution of Learning Outcome Assessment (NILOA) provost survey in 2017 that found accreditation, external accountability and quality improvement drove the institutional IQA activities (Jankowski et al., 2018). Internal drivers of IQA in the UNESCO cases were leadership support and appropriate financial incentives to staff and faculty that engage in IQA activities. Other factors that impact IQA activities in the NILOA research were faculty engagement in assessment activities, faculty-led academic assessment committees, effective communication of student learning outcomes and assessment-related technologies. NILOA also proposed an excellent IQA model with eight criteria: (1) Involvement of stakeholders in IQA activities; (2) Announcement of student learning outcomes; (3) Development of an IQA activities evaluation plan; (4) Dedication of resources to implement and evaluate internal quality assurance activities; (5) Initiating current institutional IQA activities; (6) Ensuring transparency in the IQA of academic programs’ results; (7) Providing evidence of using IQA of academic programs’ results; (8) Developing a self-assessment and improvement plan.

The first criterion in the excellent IQA model has specific requirements referring to the selection of stakeholders to participate in the IQA process including: (1) Senior administrators (for example, Board Regent’s members);

- Personnel responsible for overseeing institutional assessment of academic programs (including academic and co-curricular activities); (2) Staff in charge of institutional and programmatic accreditation; (3) Fulltime and part-time faculty from different departments and/or representatives from departments; (4) Student support staff such as academic and career counselors, student service staff and librarians; Students from a variety of majors and years, and/or representatives of student governing bodies; (5) Representatives from the public community or external stakeholders that may be involved in the student outcomes statements including: + Alumni from a variety of majors and years, and/or representatives from an alumni group/organization; + Employers and/or business representatives from the community; + Students who have completed some courses at another institution; (6) Community-based organizations and/or community partners; (7) Members of an institutional supervisory body or a regulatory body.

Third, institutions need to choose suitable IQA instruments to promote quality in teaching and learning, management and employability. Analysis of the UNESCO research revealed that course evaluation, program evaluation/monitoring, student satisfaction survey, workload assessment/recording, teacher supervision, teaching analysis poll, institutional evaluation, target and performance agreements (self-evaluation), supervision of student internships, tutors and supervisors, curriculum review, and program evaluation by student surveys are common IQA tools for teaching and learning (Martin, 2017). Employer surveys and in-depth interviews, job market analyses, employer involvement in study program revision, assessment of student competencies and employer satisfaction surveys are common IQA tools used to assess employability.

In the U.S., the IQA system for teaching and learning and management all follow steps in the assessment cycle in Figure 1. The U.S. assessment cycle shares four similarities in plan-do-check-act (PDCA) mostly used in AUN-QA standards (Figure 2). Noticeably, in this updated model, explicit outcomes are required as significant indicators for providing evidence of program achievement. Although the IQA model is different across countries, they all follow the same philosophy-ensuring the academic programs make continuous quality improvement.

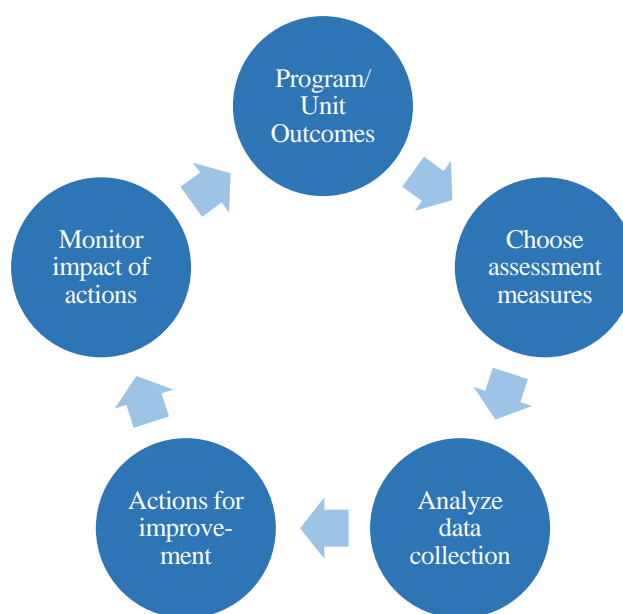


Figure 1. Assessment Cycle (Kuh et al., 2015)

### 2.3. IQA Challenges to Engage Faculty

The emergence of quality enhancement motivates institutions to build a sustainable IQA system to improve teaching, learning and management activities. Still, many articles in the literature stated IQA procedures increased bureaucracy in documenting and formalizing procedures (Cardoso et al., 2019), created an extra workload in monitoring academic performance, increased the demand and availability for non-academic tasks, resulted in invisible evidence of quality improvement (Cardoso et al., 2019; Vukasovic, 2014) and distracted the faculty from major responsibilities in teaching and research (Tavares et al., 2017). The lack of faculty engagement in the IQA process, particularly when compared with administrative participation, indicated that IQA might not be a core academic interest and might lead to an

overemphasis on compliance with external stakeholders' requirements such as accreditation (Do, 2018; Nguyen, 2017). Effective IQA systems encourage a change of culture to make improvements; therefore, the level of institutionalization (Vukasovic, 2014), a process for promoting new 'ways of doing things,' becomes structured, desirable, appropriate for institutions. However, accomplishing this change is a challenge. IQA is contextually bound so "one size fits all" does not always work (Cardoso et al., 2019; Vukasovic, 2014). Therefore, institutions need to be cautious and harmonize the implementation of international IQA with the institutions' culture, characteristics and actors (Cardoso et al., 2019), with traditional management and teaching in the local context (Nguyen, 2017).

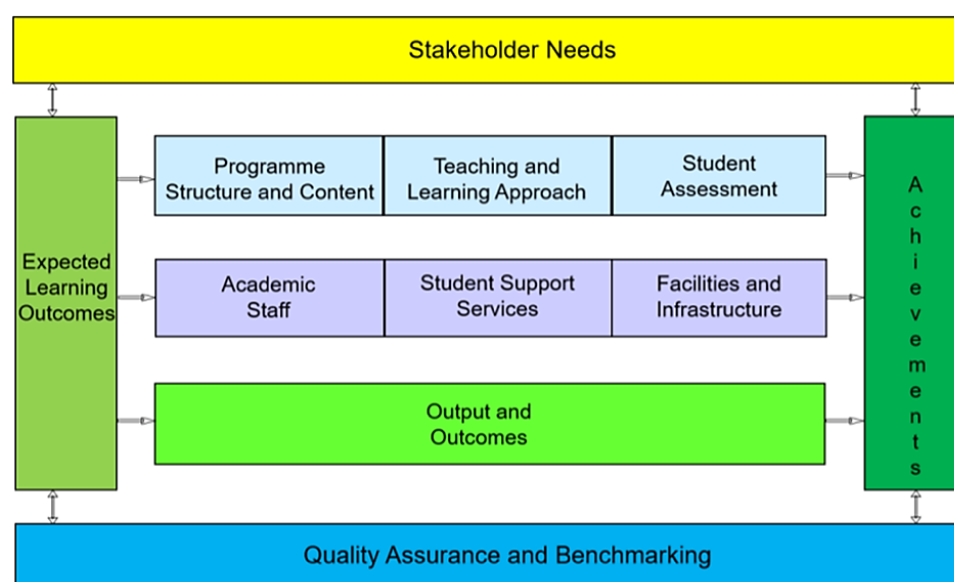


Figure 2. AUN-QA Assessment model at Program Level Version 4.0 (AUN-QA, 2020)

#### 2.4. IQA Best Practices to Engage Faculty

The literature showed there are many critics of bureaucracy and extra workload in IQA (Cardoso et al., 2019; Tavares et al., 2017; Vukasovic, 2014); however, if IQA is done correctly, it would improve quality for the institutions (Marin, 2017). The UNESCO literature recommended six ways IQA could leverage change: (1) connect IQA to the institution's environment; (2) allow for diversity, innovation and experimentation; (3) provide external QA support for IQA self-regulation; (4) make quality of institutional IQA discussions; (5) involve external stakeholders in the discussion of quality; (6) make IQA a part of strategic management and link it to resource allocation. AUN-QA (2020) also suggested five elements for effective IQA: (1) keep it as simple as possible; (2) do not make it a bureaucratic process; (3) ensure the support of management and staff; (4) establish a right balance between a centralized and decentralized approach; (5) make use of effective instruments and ensure the internal quality assurance system is tuned to national and international trends. In addition, Banta (2002) suggested 17 characteristics to judge the effectiveness of outcome assessment:

1. Involves stakeholders (faculty members, administrators, students, student affairs professionals, employers, community representatives) from the outset to incorporate their needs and interests and to solicit later support.
2. Begins when the need is recognized; allows sufficient time for development. Timing is crucial.
3. Has a written plan with clear purposes that is related to the goals people value - to a larger set of conditions that promote change. (Assessment is a vehicle for improvement, not an end in itself.)
4. Bases assessment approaches on clear, explicitly stated program objectives.
5. Has knowledgeable, effective leadership.
6. Involves recognition that assessment is essential to learning, and therefore is everyone's responsibility.
7. Includes faculty and staff development to prepare individuals to implement assessment and use the findings.
8. Devolves responsibility for assessment to the unit level.
9. Recognizes that learning is multidimensional and developmental and thus uses multiple measures, therefore maximizing reliability and validity.

10. Assesses processes as well as outcomes.
11. Is undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive, and enabling - on a continuing basis.
12. Incorporates continuous communication with constituents concerning activities and findings. Effective outcomes assessment produces data that guide *improvement* on a continuing basis.
13. Produces credible evidence of learning and organizational effectiveness.
14. Ensures that assessment data are used continuously to improve programs and services.
15. Provides a vehicle for demonstrating accountability to stakeholders within and outside the institution.
16. Encompasses the expectation that outcomes assessment will be ongoing, not episodic.
17. Incorporates ongoing evaluation and improvement of the assessment process itself.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### 3.1. Methods

The purpose of this paper was to review higher education policies and research articles discussing strategies for engaging faculty in the IQA of academic programs. The researchers utilized document analysis of higher education policies and accreditation standards to address the faculty engagement in IQA and international published articles on suggestions and recommendations to engage faculty in the IQA process of academic programs. The thematic and content analysis of published articles is suitable for studying a central phenomenon that requires exploration and understanding (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, this document analysis review seeks to construct understanding of the strategies to engage faculty in IQA of academic programs.

#### 3.2. Sources

The literature search was conducted using keywords such as faculty engagement, faculty buy-in, and program outcomes assessment to find relevant articles in the Scopus, ISI and google scholar electronic databases. In addition, the researchers looked for higher education policies and accreditation standards that would have a direct impact on the requirement of faculty engagement in IQA of academic programs. A total of about 15 published articles and five policies were included for analysis.

#### 3.3. Data analysis

The major research approach for this paper was document analysis of international research relating to faculty engagement in program outcome assessment in higher education. This approach allowed the researcher to review or evaluate printed and electronic materials from multiple sources to provide evidence for the study (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis combines both thematic and content analysis. Through comparing, contrasting, analyzing and synthesizing the selected literature, new knowledge and perspectives were developed (Grbich, 2013).

The paper starts by providing foundational concepts about the internal quality assurance of academic programs, IQA definition and purposes, the IQA model around the world, IQA challenges and IQA best practices. This information allows readers to understand the relationship between faculty engagement and IQA good practices, especially the efforts to move the IQA process toward continuous quality improvement.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of accreditation policies and articles to encourage faculty engagement in IQA of academic programs emerged two major themes: the external drivers of faculty engagement in IQA and strategies to engage faculty in IQA of academic programs.

#### 4.1. External Drivers of Faculty Engagement in IQA

In the U.S., the first driver of IQA implementation in the U.S. was changing accreditation practices from input to output due to the new requirements of the Higher Education Act (HEA). In 2008, the Act included 110 new rules and reporting obligations for higher education and accreditation. These provisions asked HEIs to provide greater accountability to strengthen federal interest in the academic area (Brittingham, 2009). The HEA continued to address five key issues: college costs, accreditation, state spending on colleges, textbook costs and copyright. For accreditation, the U.S. government pushed more accountability in education policy by requiring institutions to collect more data on student learning outcomes to demonstrate more rigorous expectations of academic quality. As a result, the regional and specialized accreditation agencies embedded such requirements in the accreditation standards. At the institutional



level, the regional accreditation agencies required institutions to provide systematic IQA of academic programs. For example, a U.S. regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), indicated in the standard 4.B:

*“The institution engages in ongoing assessment of student learning as part of its commitment to the educational outcomes of its students.*

*a. The institution has effective processes for assessment of student learning and for the achievement of learning goals in academic and co-curricular offerings.*

*b. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.*

*c. The institution’s processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect good practice, including the substantial participation of faculty, instructional and other relevant staff members.” (HLC, 2020)*

At the program level, the requirement of student learning outcomes also receives much attention. For example, the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) has Standard 4 about student learning assessment including having an assessment process, making assessment measurements, and collecting and analyzing student assessment data to provide evidence of using the assessment results for continuous improvement. In order to provide evidence of student learning outcomes, HLC stated clearly that IQA good practices need to include substantial participation of faculty, and instructional and other relevant staff members. The ACBSP required the engagement of multiple stakeholders in the IQA process, especially faculty engagement including updating the program learning outcomes, choosing the appropriate assessment measures then analyzing and discussing assessment results at the program level to make continuous improvement. This approach requires faculty to be engaged at all steps in the outcome assessment of academic programs.

#### **4.2. Strategies to Engage Faculty in IQA of Academic Programs**

The literature contained an extensive discussion of the significant role faculty play in the success and sustainability of IQA. However, there are many challenges to engaging faculty in the IQA of academic programs such as additional workload, no direct impact on the quality improvement of student learning outcomes and insufficient resources to sustain good IQA practices. From the analysis of published articles emerged three major themes: Resources, IQA model and reward/recognition.

##### **4.2.1. Resources**

In order for the faculty to actively participate in IQA activities, the IQA staff in the department of quality assurance needs to explain clearly the available resources of the institution. For example, some faculty members did not even know the institution-level department of quality assurance or the related guidelines and official documents published on the QA websites existed (McCullough & Jones, 2015). Therefore, staff and leaders of the quality assurance department need to make sure that faculty members know about the resources available to use in the IQA implementation process. In addition, the institutional leaders’ support such as mentioning the importance of quality assurance at meetings, providing continuous financial support for quality assurance activities, integrating IQA activities into faculty tenure and promotion to maintain the sustainable participation of faculty members in IQA activities is important. Leaders need to support the IQA model with a large amount of highly qualified faculty members who have mastered the knowledge of IQA to provide professional development in IQA to other faculty members across the institution.

One of the resources that positively impact faculty members’ participation in IQA is the continuous professional development of program outcomes assessment (Hong, 2018) through a center for teaching and learning. This center could create a community to support faculty members from collecting and analyzing assessment results to exchanging and discussing results for quality improvement. At the same time, this center could provide financial support so that faculty members can implement new teaching methods aligned with the new requirements of student outcome assessment to provide IQA evidence. In addition, faculty members can use those financial resources to share their research related to IQA at institutional events, training or seminars. Although there was still no specific research to show the impact of this initiative on faculty members participating in IQA of academic programs, the enthusiasm of faculty members to participate in IQA activities created a culture of asking questions and providing evidence of continuous quality improvement. These were the positive benefits for faculty members’ professional development activities.

Smith and Gordon (2018) made two proposals to encourage faculty members to participate in the IQA of academic programs. The first was to build a community of faculty members interested in IQA and then train them so that they could lead IQA workshops and seminars for other faculty members. The faculty members could provide

better feedback when learning from their colleagues' experiences in different departments and colleges within the institution. Such connections created a learning environment for faculty members. In addition to the training sessions, informal discussions in the coffee shop allowed faculty members to freely share their opinions about IQA of academic programs. The experienced faculty members who shared the difficulties and the opportunities from the quality assurance activities had better effects on other faculty members than sharing from staff members in charge of IQA. The second proposal was to connect faculty members with easy-to-use resources such as Listserves, professional organizations, online training, and IQA seminars such as the Association of Assessment Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) so they could learn IQA knowledge for their particular disciplines.

#### 4.2.2. *Reward and Recognition*

In order to encourage faculty members to participate in the IQA of academic programs, some research studies in the literature have proposed embedding the IQA model into the current and annual teaching and learning process for faculty members such as quality assurance of academic affairs and co-curricular affairs to improve the quality of academic programs (Robinson, Sanders, Hobbs, Demeter & Singer-Freeman, 2019; Stitt-Bergh et al., 2019; Schoepp & Tezcan-Unal, 2016; Ndoye & Parker, 2010). Faculty members are an important factor in the IQA process of academic programs from planning to teaching and using teaching results to continuously improve quality. Their engagement was not only to write reports for the programmatic accreditation (Meredith, 2013). Another suggestion from the literature was to encourage faculty members to take a leadership role, directly participating in the IQA process from the program to department and institution level. Their participation at all levels increased consistency across the colleges within an institution (Baham, 2019; Verzinski et al., 2019; Schoepp & Tezcan-Unal, 2016).

In addition, for the faculty members to understand the steps in the IQA process and effectively implement them, it is necessary to have training courses on the IQA of academic programs so that the IQA process has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Higher education institutions can use the books written by famous assessment experts to support faculty members' understanding of the IQA of academic training programs (Allen, 2004; Astin & Antonio, 2012; Banta & Palomba, 2015; Kuh et al., 2015; Suskie, 2009). The reference books also have recommendations ranging from building an effective IQA model, identifying factors affecting the participation process, and holding workshops for effective professional development to facilitating faculty members' understanding of the IQA process (Verzinski et al., 2019; Price et al., 2011).

Verzinski et al. (2019) also suggested that faculty members be assigned responsibility for coordinating, leading and participating in the process of meta-assessment of IQA of the academic programs (Fulcher, Coleman & Sundre, 2016) in order to implement the IQA process more effectively and achieve the purpose of continuous quality improvement (Stitt-Bergh, Kinzie & Fulcher, 2018). To sustain IQA activities, HEIs should have supporting policies such as reducing teaching hours, having new job titles such as program coordinator so that faculty members could have appropriate benefits and payments when participating in annual IQA activities. Feldhaus et al (2015) emphasized that in order to encourage faculty members to participate in IQA activities, institutions should consider the internal and external motivation of the faculty members or factors that have a direct impact on their decisions. Emil & Cress (2014) also provided an assessment model to encourage faculty members to participate in quality assurance activities from the lowest level to the highest level. The factor with the lowest impact was the requirements from external stakeholders such as accreditation and the factor with the highest impact was rewards. If the HEIs have limited financial resources, it is advisable to embed IQA activities in the responsibilities of the faculty members and use them as indicators to evaluate the performance of the faculty members in the faculty annual evaluation report. In order for faculty members to sustainably participate in IQA activities and have a positive impact on quality improvement, IQA activities should be included in the tenure and promotion criteria (Hutchings, 2010). In addition, the universities should connect IQA activities to faculty members' research activities (Hong, 2018) and have specific research resources associated with IQA activities (Emil & Cress, 2014).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The literature show that most HEIs worked on quality assurance to provide accountable evidence to external stakeholders such as a department of education and accreditation agencies, therefore, administrators mostly showcased the best part of the institutions. The review and analysis of literature have resulted in learning about strategies for engaging faculty in the IQA of academic programs and shifting the quality management of academic

programs from accountability to both accountability and quality improvement. The three emerging themes from the content analysis provide some implications for international higher education.

First, to manage the quality of academic programs across the higher education system, the higher education policy makers can consider issuing program standards with basic requirements for maintaining the fundamental quality assurance of academic programs. Specifically, an updated policy on program standards should emphasize more on the accountability of student success, especially the evidence of achieving program learning outcomes upon students' graduation. This specific requirement has been commonly used to manage the quality of academic programs in developed countries. Although external requirements have the least impact on faculty engagement in the IQA of academic programs suggested by (Emil & Cress, 2014), this policy can serve as an external driver for HEIs to build up the IQA system. This approach is similar to what U.S. has done in implementing the IQA of academic programs over the past twenty years to reduce the tension between IQA for accountability and improvement (Ewell, 2009). Therefore, an updated policy on academic programs is the first need.

Second, for the accreditation agency, the accreditation standards for institutional and programmatic accreditation should reflect the current practices of accreditation principles in the world. This literature review demonstrated that accreditation has always served as a powerful driver by external stakeholders to encourage institutions to provide evidence of accountability (Ewell, 2009). In particular, many U.S. HEIs indicated having major challenges when attempting to engage faculty in the implementation of IQA in academic programs; therefore, the accreditation standards should address more language about faculty engagement in the guidelines, especially the commitment of faculty in the IQA activities to facilitate its implementation at the institution level. For example, the updated HLC accreditation standards in standard 4B included the language of faculty engagement as a good practice in the IQA of academic programs. Most importantly, this requirement supports the IQA process from accountability toward quality improvement. Therefore, international accreditation agencies should use this practice to facilitate the implementation of IQA of academic programs at the institution level.

Third, the literature reviewed indicates the close relationship between faculty engagement and the success of the IQA process to improve the quality of student learning. At the institution level, two considerations for faculty engagement are the IQA process and reward/recognition. It is necessary to embed the language of faculty engagement in the IQA process. Also, faculty responsibilities should be clarified in each step of the IQA process so they can understand and meet the expectations. More importantly, the requirement of faculty engagement in the IQA of academic programs needs to be embedded in the tenure and promotion criteria, faculty annual report and annual recognition/rewards. Also, HEIs should consider allocating annual resources to support annual IQA initiatives and have a reward system available to motivate faculty to commit to the IQA of academic programs.

A limitation in this review of literature is that most of the literature was written by U.S. researchers; therefore, it might not represent international perspectives on strategies to engage faculty in the IQA of academic programs. However, the knowledge gained from this analysis may result in new perspectives that could be applied in international higher education settings.

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