

A Social Realist Panorama on Quality Assurance: A Case of the University of Namibia

Alina Uusiku¹, Kelvin Mubiana Katukula², Lukas Matati Josua³

¹Namibia Green Hydrogen Research Institute, University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia

²National Commission on Research, Science and Technology, Windhoek, Namibia

³Department of Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Namibia, Oshakati, Namibia

Email: auusiku@unam.na, kkatukula@ncrst.na, ljosua@unam.na

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Abstract

Quality is an aspect that can be defined differently depending on the scenario in which it is being used. It measures the level of satisfaction with which the service is being delivered to and from any working organisation, including institutions of higher learning. The article highlights the components and angles of quality higher education as per the Harvey and Green analysis. The different levels and understanding of quality, such as exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation, are closely related to the teaching and learning in disciplines of the field of science at the University of Namibia. It also fully interrogates the Margaret Archer Social Realism Theory components of structure, culture, and human agencies at the national and institutional levels. While in Namibia, the delivery of quality higher education is determined by the national quality assurance agencies, the process to ensure its implementation success in institutions starts and entirely depends on the institutions of higher learning. In the case of UNAM, an internal quality assurance unit, centre, and policies are established to facilitate the quality assurance processes of institutional and external agencies.

Keywords

Agency, Culture, Quality Assurance, Structure, Teaching and Learning, University of Namibia

1. Introduction

Recently, quality higher education has been one of the most desirable goals for almost every country (Junias et al., 2022). The development of mass higher education (HE) has led to a growing concern about several aspects of quality, including the relevance of higher education for the job market (Noui, 2020; Storen &

Aamodt, 2010). The authors further stated that the quality of higher education and the benefit and usefulness of the study programme for career and work tasks could also be measured through students' employability (Behle, 2020; Hasan et al., 2024). Are the students being produced by the institutions of higher learning ready for the job market? Are the graduates fully equipped to tackle and conduct the work tasks in the industry? Are additional training or internships required for students after graduation and before they can embark on their actual studied job career paths? These questions determine the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, including UNAM as an institution of higher learning.

Recent trends in higher education have increased the attention given to the quality of the teaching offered to the students as major clients of the institutions of higher learning (Azikuru et al., 2017). From the student perspective, this could be due to various reasons like: 1) More students to be taught than ever before, shifts in the conception of the role of universities; 2) States and students demand that the learning experience be worth their money (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2023). The increasing viewing of higher education as an investment that should contribute to national prosperity in the long term; 3) Changing student body and teaching methods; and modification of expectations regarding teaching (Henard & Ringuet, 2008). Thus, university roles change with and/or as time progresses. The population of students in higher education in the 1960s is no longer the same as that of the 1980s. Also, the requirements of teaching and learning change too.

Changes in the funding structure of many universities in the institutions of higher learning do play a huge role. Nowadays, most institutions can no longer sustain themselves without external funding. Therefore, such funding agencies come with guidelines and requirements that should be met for the financing to be issued. Such requirements demand quality research, teaching, and learning to produce excellent results and outcomes for their cost consumption. Additionally, due to the alarming world development and social diversity, student bodies within institutions are transformed to suit all students from all walks of life and backgrounds. Attainment is no longer reserved for the elite as it was in the past.

2. Method

This paper adopted a reflective design on a social context (Omobowale et al., 2020). The information was gathered through personal reflection on contextual practices, experiences, and analysis of the institutional documents such as policies. The authors reflected and interpreted the existing data from institutional documents such as policies. Stanfield (2016) refers to the reflective design that is predicated on the researchers' knowledge-based contextual reflections revolving around existing and subsisting data and social reality to arrive at contextual submissions. Personal reflection is, according to Bolton 2010, cited in Quinn & Vorster (2016), "paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively". Critical reflection enables transformational lifelong learning that provides new mean-

ing to the context of practice (Haipinge et al., 2025). No ethical issues were observed because the contextual reflection involves no subjects.

3. Evaluation of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

On the other hand, ensuring the quality of higher education goes together with evaluating teaching and learning activities within the institution. According to Cook et al. (2024), the evaluation of teaching by the students assesses the overall quality of teaching and learning process and equity of grading procedures, as well as other lecturer-specific issues. The delivery of quality education can be measured, monitored, and maintained through set evaluation processes for teaching and learning activities. Hence, to understand the effect of teaching and learning, evaluation of teaching and learning is required, whilst its outcomes can be used to improve teaching practices. According to Ramsden (1992), evaluating teaching and learning involves many activities, such as collecting, interpreting, and making informed judgments of actions to improve teaching and learning. Furthermore, Ramsden (1992) stated that the evaluation process had become an integral step in achieving accountability to the learners and the public. It must be viewed as a way to improve teachers' professional competence and students' understanding. Additionally, Ulker (2021) and Zhao et al. (2022) agree that evaluation of teaching can be a strong practical mechanism for enhancing the teaching and learning processes and must be practised continuously to ensure effectiveness. The Student-Lecture Evaluations at UNAM, despite being sued by academics to apply for promotion (Stroebe, 2020; Stroebe, 2016), however, its is could be an effective tool for individual lectures to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional practices to improve learning outcomes.

4. Drive to Deliver Quality Work as a Teacher

Generally, quality is an assurance mechanism that ensures that clients are satisfied with the services they are paying for. In the case of institutions of higher learning like UNAM, such clients can be students, parents, community members, and private stakeholders. According to the British Standard Institution (BSI), Quality is defined as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs (Holmes & Barrett, 2017). As a teacher, delivering quality work for customer satisfaction and maintaining personal values such as good self-consciousness, consistency, and keeping up with one's image and future self-evaluation is important. According to the UNAM (2022a), some of its relevant objectives include: 1) Clarifying expected academic behaviour at the university; 2) Supporting scholarly competence through self-discipline and rigour.

4.1. Components and Different Angles of Quality Higher Education

According to Dicker et al. (2019), quality in Higher Education (HE) is defined and/or viewed differently by different people. Harvey & Green (1993) further cat-

egorised such understanding of quality concerning HE into five interlinked aspects, namely: 1) Terms of exceptional, which refers to exceeding high standards and passing a required standard; 2) Terms of consistency, which is exhibited through zero defects and through the culture of getting it right the first time; 3) Quality as fitness for purpose; which requires the products or service to meet the stated purpose, customer specification and satisfaction; 4) Quality as value for money; which is achieved through efficiency and effectiveness, and 5) Quality as transformative; measured through qualitative change.

4.1.1. Quality as Exceptional

Quality as an exception embodied three distinctive notions: excellence and passing a set of minimal standards (Kadhila et al., 2013; Harvey & Green, 1993). From the view and perspective of UNAM, an academic giving and improving lectures every year can contribute to the first notion of exceptional quality. Lectures can be on the same topic every year. However, improved research on the same subject as science is always changing through research, and new findings and evidence arise after years of researching the specific subject. Quality is excellent and is related to the availability of resources. Suppose there is enough budget to buy laboratory consumables, equipment, and properly calibrated measuring instruments and laboratory equipment. In that case, chemistry students can attain excellent results after their respective subject laboratory sessions. The latter is also confirmed by Harvey & Green (1993), who stated that if a Nobel Prize winner lectures, you have a well-equipped laboratory with the most up-to-date scientific apparatus and a well-stocked library, then excellent results will be produced.

Regarding compliance with the standard, there are set pre-entry requisites for registration into the faculty of science at UNAM. Only secondary school students with certain symbols in science subjects must register for science study programs at UNAM. For example, to register for a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry (Honors) degree programme in addition to the UNAM general admission requirement, a candidate must hold at least a C symbol on NSSC or equivalent qualification in mathematics and physical science (UNAM, 2022b). Such quality checks to standards by the faculty of Agriculture, Engineering, and Natural Science (FAENS) enable students to perform better as their pre-knowledge in these science subjects is already strong, allowing the teaching and learning to comply with the exceptional quality set.

4.1.2. Quality as Perfection or Consistency

Quality as perfection or consistency is exhibited through zero defects and the culture of getting it right for the first time (Harvey & Green, 1993). Based on the experience of a chemistry teacher, it is time-consuming to attain such quality. In most cases, it is important to have good analytical grade chemical consumables in the approved specification range of the company supplying such consumables. Such analytical grades and purity of chemical consumables must be of the specification of at least 90% or above. It enables reproducibility of the respective exper-

imental results and, thus, compliance with the quality of perfection and consistency.

4.1.3. Quality as Fit for Purpose

The quality required for a product or service is analysed differently to meet its meaning. Thus, quality is judged by how much the product or service fits its purpose and harnesses the drive to perfection (Harvey & Green, 1993). Chemistry teachers are required to meet the needs of the students to perform better and produce good research and laboratory results. Students can use such results to write their final laboratory report examination and apply their knowledge to the industry when they graduate and become employable.

The determination of whether the quality of teaching I give the students fits the purpose of the student to be employable in the industry after graduation is still questionable. There are many other sets of quality criteria for an employing company that will be interested in graduate students. Sometimes, such a set of quality criteria is beyond our institutional control. Hence, the quality as fit for purpose is difficult to measure when the product is the chemistry graduate students, or the service provided is knowledge delivery. However, this case can be improved by improving teaching and learning methods in the classroom, translating and transitioning them from knowledge consumers to knowledge creation and employability creators when students graduate. The fit quality for purpose can be slightly met by producing self-employing graduates and products of the University of Namibia.

4.1.4. Quality as Value for Money

The notion of getting what you paid for is represented by quality as value for money. The UNAM students pay for their school fees. They are attributed to receiving quality education for the value of their money. In addition, most students whose tuition fees are sponsored by student funding agencies like the Namibian Student Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF) must pass their respective registered academic year for the funding body to keep paying for the following year. Suppose a student fails a registered academic year. In that case, NASFAF stops the failed year's payment and resumes it after the student passes the respective academic year. For that reason, delivering quality education is important to avoid unnecessary failure of students, which results in student dropouts, as they cannot pay for the failed academic year. Anyolo et al. (2018) stated that quality education for sustainable development should be the one that helps student develop the right attitude, skills, and knowledge to make well-informed decisions for the benefit of their country's development.

In the context of UNAM, quality as value for money is also relatable in such a way that students pay laboratory fees and expect education to be for sustainable development. If quality education is delivered, the student tends to graduate and be employed or create job opportunities, thus getting value for their invested funds in their education. Suppose efficient and effective results are not obtained

in the laboratory experiments, which will enable them to write good practical reports and pass examinations. In that case, it also contributes to student failure and repetition and reduces the student graduation rate.

4.1.5. Quality as Transformation

The Quality of transformation is measured through qualitative change (Harvey & Green, 1993). It is complicated to measure such changes when the customers of higher education are students. However, it can be measured through research conducted by students. The products that students develop in their laboratory experiments can also be a measure of quality as transformative. Some of the products can be innovative. For example, suppose a final-year chemistry student produces a new drug with good healing efficiency in the laboratory. In that case, such research can be patented by the university. The drug can be commercially produced based on the student's study and exact experimental procedures. Harvey & Green (1993) confirm the latter, stating that higher education transformation is a unique, negotiated process. The same applies to research, whereby the teacher produces new knowledge in a vacuum and transforms a given body of knowledge for a particular purpose.

5. UNAM Attempts to Improve the Quality of Service Delivery

It is reported that in the past, quality was undermined. At the same time, certain factors such as audits, evaluations, appraisals, and full-cost pricing raise the quality of work within the institutions of higher learning (Harvey & Green, 1993). The latter can relate to UNAM, which recently launched its Performance Management System (PMS). The main goal and objective of the PMS are to ensure the work done by all university employees is in alignment with the strategic objectives of the institution, whose themes are: 1) Institutional sustainability; 2) Higher education graduate employability; 3) Transformative research, innovation; 4) Community engagement, social relevance and environmental sustainability; 5) Institutional planning and internationalisation (UNAM, 2019b). The themed strategic plans are all developed to ensure the quality of service to the university, the government, and the institutional stakeholders.

The UNAM PMS will also ensure internal academic and administrative staff audits that determine the extent of quality service delivery in their daily work operations. The audit exercise through the PMS for quality institutional service delivery will work with UNAM's existing quality assurance policies and procedures, such as the policy on learning and teaching, and quality assurance and management policies and procedures. The PMS is expected to bring out the results of the evaluated staff's individual performance scorecards. The scorecards can strengthen, improve, train, and capacitate individual staff members struggling to deliver excellent, consistent quality, fit for purpose, and valuable for money in their respective roles at UNAM.

The PMS will inform UNAM of its progress in teaching and learning, a system used together with institutional policies to evaluate the institution's progress on

quality service delivery. South African institutions of Higher learning also perform similar audit processes. According to [Boughey \(2007\)](#), the institutional audit process attempts to assess the impact of teaching and learning to inform the institutions' planning. The outcomes of institutional quality assurance and audit exercises aim to promote efficiency and accountability discourses, and they hope to contribute to society's transformation and create opportunities for all [Boughey \(2007\)](#). The contextual analysis revealed that the staff adopted a culture, as espoused, informally. Staff members have differing views on the PMS, some feel that it aligns with institutional strategic objectives. However, some feel that the PMS seems to be a policing practice, unclear, and lacks feedback, which hinders staff from improving the quality of their practices.

6. Culture, Structure, and Agency Concerning Quality Assurance at the National and Institutional Level in Namibia

In Namibia, the institutions of Higher learning are regulated by external regulatory agencies such as the Namibia Qualification Authority (NQA), National Council of Higher Education (NCHE), and Namibia Training Authority (NTA). According to [Kadhila & Iipumbu \(2019\)](#), these agencies place the country's quality assurance systems at national and institutional levels. The objectives of NQA include setting up and administering a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and accreditation of persons, institutions, and organisations that provide education and training according to accreditation requirements. NCHE aims to promote the establishment of a coordinated higher education system, access for students to higher education institutions, quality assurance in higher education, programme accreditation, and institutional audit ([Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019](#)).

Margaret Archer, the dean of the critical realist movement, brought theoretical reflection on culture, social structure, and human agency to a successful conclusion through empirical investigation. Professor [Archer \(2003\)](#) has rebuffed the duality of agency and structure and chooses instead the stratified conception of reality that does not elide the difference between the systemic and the interactive strata of society but acknowledges the relative autonomy of cultural systems and social structures ([Archer, 2003](#)). Thus, these components are key to understanding the social world ([Shalyefu, 2017](#)). According to [Shalyefu \(2017\)](#), who further critically mapped the sociological framework of analysis, [Bhaskar \(1978; 1979\)](#) and [Archer \(1995; 1996\)](#) defined structure as the legislations, acts, policies, and official documents. Culture is the beliefs, values, and practices.

In contrast, the agencies are the academic leaders, students, lecturers, and developers. These various external agencies are the structures with their laws and regulations forming their culture of monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance in institutions of higher learning. Such external agencies have their cultural practices through the respective mandated themes, such as accreditation, institutional audit, certification, NQF registration, licensing, and registration of provid-

ers and de-registration of institutions to achieve their various and respective objectives. The instructional stakeholders and evaluators from external quality assurance agencies coming to the institutions are the agents of such agencies and institutions, respectively.

Institutions like UNAM have to abide by and meet the standards of the national external quality assurance agencies. UNAM also has its own policies and internal control measures for ensuring that its institutional set standards and policies uphold quality as value for money to its stakeholders. In a global context, publishing journals such as Elsevier, Royal Society of Chemistry, Functional Materials, and others are the structures that lecturers, researchers, and academic staff should compile to meet their publishing requirements. We have good publishing journals in Africa. In Namibia, some of the publishing research journals include the National Commission on Research, Science and Technology's Namibian Journal for Research, Science and Technology, UNAM repository journal, and Science publishing journals. We have the Annual Science Research Conference at the departmental level or faculty, and the School of Science every year.

The culture of setting standards at global publishing journals is set with the impact factor. For example, the impact factor of certain journals can be seven, while others are three, four, five, or six. The higher the impact factor, the higher the quality of your work. Hence, high-impact factor journals consider groundbreaking research results of good quality for publication and further increase your publishing ranking. The identical article publishing procedures apply to the continental and national levels. On the institutional level at UNAM, we strive for open-access publication to make our work visible and fully accessible to the world. The latter promotes a high chance of article citation, which improves UNAM's institutional ranking. The ranking increases with the number of institutionally cited works or published papers. At the departmental and individual levels, our culture strives to write more grant proposals and source funding for research work. Obtaining funding increases the university's publication strength and sometimes budgets within the project funds to pay for our publications of papers in good journals with higher impact factors. The same applies to individual goals of writing more grant proposals for other researchers to acquire more funding, enabling them to achieve their above criteria for themselves and the entire university.

The structure empowers the agents differently, and that agency can be collective or individual concerning their social role and capacity to act voluntarily (Boughey, 2012). In this case, agents at the global and continental levels are the article reviewers who comply with the standards they are reviewing articles for and assess the submitted manuscripts for publication. They are sometimes rejected if the submitted manuscripts do not meet their standards. If they meet the publishing agency's standards, they give feedback, sometimes comments that enable further improvements, and resubmit. At the institutional, faculty, school, and departmental levels, we have groups of academic people (human agents) in the same

research themes or common interest areas who meet and review, and address the external reviewers' comments.

7. Culture, Structure, and Agency Concerning Quality Assurance at UNAM

Kadhila & Iipumbu (2019) stressed that, until now, quality assurance has been one of the important aspects of the reform in higher education in Namibia. Therefore, quality assurance practices must be implemented to foresee such transformation at institutions of higher learning in the country. UNAM has a quality assurance unit called the Centre for Quality Assurance Management (CEQUAM), whose institutional policy objectives are to: 1) Ensure that university staff, students, governance bodies, and external stakeholders that quality procedures are in place to improve the quality of higher education. 2) To foster and sustain a quality culture supported by ongoing learning and innovation at UNAM. 3) To maintain public confidence in the quality and standard of UNAM staff and students. 4) To confirm the effectiveness of the quality procedures through audits and evaluations. 5) To facilitate quality enhancement based on recommendations from reviewers. 6) To align UNAM internal quality assurance processes with the legislative provision and compliance with relevant national quality standards agencies (UNAM, 2021). The UNAM Quality Assurance and Management Policy and Procedures are complemented by other institutional policies, such as teaching and learning, to achieve its objectives effectively.

7.1. Structure Concerning Quality Assurance at UNAM

In interrogating Professor Archer's social realism of theory, the UNAM Quality Assurance and Management Policy is the structure. The policy deals with institutional program development, which embodies the programme accreditation aspects. The policy also maintains that the institution can provide programmes such as physical infrastructures, qualified human personnel, and operational finance before applying for accreditation. The policy also deals with quality review by CEQUAM internal audit before an external audit by accreditation bodies, external audit by accreditation bodies, annual monitoring of the academic programme, and implementation of audit recommendations. The policy also facilitates institutional curriculum development and stakeholder engagement. The departments initiate the curriculum content mapping out its important stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Health and Social Services, the Namibia Institute of Pathology Limited, and chemical supplier companies in the case of curriculum development at the chemistry, physics, and material science departments. Stakeholder engagement is critical with relevant stakeholders, as those stakeholders and companies will likely employ the graduating chemistry students. Benchmarking with other sister universities for factors like pre-conditioning modules and credit recognition of programme modules allows smooth transitioning when students must further their studies at such universities or others. The benchmarking support letters are

also issued as part of evidence in curriculum development and programme accreditation processes.

While UNAM is aspiring to follow suit, in countries like South Africa, academic development has gone through several theoretical and ideological shifts, which have seen it move from equity to a focus on efficiency (Boughey, 2007). The author further stated that, in many respects, these shifts arise in response to the wider institutional and national policy contexts, which have also reoriented themselves from radical transformational objectives (Boughey, 2007). The UNAM case, curriculum development, and programme accreditation documents are submitted to the school boards, academic committee, and the Senate. Once the Senate approves, the papers will be forwarded to NQA for NQF registration. The documents are further submitted to NCHE for assessment and programme development. NQA requires relevant institutional stakeholders to support and endorse the respective applied accreditation programme. The NCHE checks for relevant accreditation requirements such as infrastructure, available library books and journals, e-learning processes and documentation, departmental budget, and external programme sites.

After the external audit, the institution is granted conditional, full, or no accreditation based on the findings and recommendations. The latter scenario applies to the curriculum development process. According to Boughey (2007), the institutional audit assists in measuring the impact of teaching and learning across the country. In South Africa, quality assurance policies have made all universities open to all candidates, unlike in the past. However, the system performs poorly, with students taking longer than the regulation time to complete the registered qualifications or failing to complete them (Boughey, 2007). The latter is relatable to UNAM students who also struggled to finish their study program, mostly in the past, when the quality assurance policy was non-existent.

7.2. Culture and Agency Concerning Quality Assurance at UNAM

At UNAM, maintaining an accredited program is a challenge. Archer (2003) stated that there is a causal power of cultural systems, and social structures are always mediated through human agency, meaning that if there is no agency, there is no system. Therefore, to elucidate the interplay between the structure and agency, the strategy separates and keeps both strata components constant. In this case of institutional analysis, the three components are interrogated on a linkage basis. A culture of programme expertise is struggling to follow conditions to keep the programme's accreditation. For example, the accredited programme's expertise sometimes continues to teach the newly accredited program using old programme contents. Such programme experts or lecturers also struggle to update and increase their assessment activities and timeframe, and not evaluate student progress based on the new program. Hence, the lecturers implement half-new and old curricula, affecting student progression and graduation rate. The culture of resistance to change while implementing the new programme at UNAM is driven

by the fact that the lecturers view themselves as content experts and struggle to follow the conditions of the new programme and CEQUAM guidance. As the driving agents, the lecturers also have a culture of not giving extra time to work on curriculum development and program accreditation activities.

The external panel members are also part of the human agencies that drive programme accreditation and curriculum development at UNAM. These panel members are institutional, national, and international personnel, and the UNAM department has signed off on them to allow them to review their program. Organisations like NQA also invite chemistry experts from the industry and other national universities to confirm and offer an external opinion on the program documents submitted by UNAM for NQF registration. To understand teaching and learning procedures at UNAM, lecturers are guided by and through the policy on learning and teaching. At the same time, the delivery of quality learning and teaching is assured by the UNAM Quality Assurance and Management Policy and Procedures (UNAM, 2021).

As human agencies drive the quality learning and teaching process at UNAM, some lecturers lack the understanding of programme accreditation and curriculum development, and that complementary work, such as curriculum development, contributes to UNAM's vision. Students as agents of the university are also required to undertake the university core modules as encouraged by the UNAM (2019a). Such modules include computer literacy, English for general communication, and contemporary social issues. The knowledge and social understanding acquired from these core modules enrich the students and place them in a better and quality position to progress well in other modules of their respective courses of study. As well as at their employable stations in the work industry, and after graduation.

8. Conclusion

The chapter revealed the importance of quality approaches used in HE, such as quality as transformative and quality as fit for money. In the past, one would not usually consider measurable and strategic action to ensure students get value for their money during teaching and learning. For students to be taught, they must pay for such service through registration and tuition fees. However, how they are taught is entirely up to me as a teacher.

The academic development course makes the national structures such as the national external quality assurance agencies (NQA, NCHE and NTA), which are mandated by the government of the Republic of Namibia for standardisation, monitoring and maintaining the structures of quality assurance, such as their policies onto institutions of High learning in the country such as UNAM. Now, one is aware of their human agent, their employee who reviews the UNAM proposed, submits programme documents, and visits campuses to physically evaluate the study program's feasibility before implementing it. The programme accreditation and curriculum development are also faced with challenges, such as requiring

time as the human agency; stakeholders, lecturers, and students struggle to allocate time for their engagement with the university CEQUAM, which is the driving unit of the quality assurance processes. Some challenges related to curriculum transformation at UNAM include high workload for academics, lack of funding for research and instructional materials, laboratories, and infrastructure.

To ensure quality, fellow lecturers could be invited to observe teaching and give feedback, creating room for improvement and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Daily teaching and learning create a stronger interrelationship between the teacher, context, and learners through instructional components and the contextual environment. For example, they consider that not all students are the same and learn differently, which can be achieved through student profiling. Finally, as an informed teacher of quality assurance in HE, ensure that teaching and learning are aligned with existing institutional quality assurance policies, and teaching and learning policies align with the institutional quality assurance documents to those of national external quality assurance agencies to ensure smooth implementation of the new academic programme.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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