STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN MALAWI'S HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Chapter 1. Introduction: Context, Principles and Aims

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Malawi's Higher Education Institutions has been prepared by the National Council for Higher Education. In developing these guidelines, a number of documents from other institutions across the world were taken into account, with the most influential being the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.* These standards and guidelines should be read in conjunction with *Standards for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions in Malawi,* in order to ensure that institutions seeking accreditation are fully aware of the requirements for compliance in all aspects of quality assurance.

1.1 Context

All over the world there is increasing interest in higher education quality and standards, reflecting both the rapid growth of higher education and its cost to the public and the private purse. There is a quest for harmonisation of quality higher education in the SADC region. Accordingly, if Malawi is to achieve its aspiration to be a dynamic and knowledge-based economy, then its higher education sector will need to demonstrate that it takes seriously the quality of its programmes and awards and is willing to put in place the means of assuring and demonstrating that quality.

Quality assurance in higher education has become a key component in the delivery of education in almost all countries in the world since this affects standards. Most institutions of higher education globally are now aiming at internationalisation of their programmes, which can be done if the standards are acceptable to all stakeholders. Malawi is no exception to the quest for quality assurance, and this need is demonstrated by the public debate on the quality of education.

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) was established to act as the body for scrutinising national qualifications, registering institutions and approving academic programmes for higher education in Malawi. The purpose of these guidelines is to assist providers of higher education in designing quality assurance procedures for academic purposes.

1.2 Principles

The guidelines in this document are underpinned by the following fundamental principles:
1. Programmes should address the interests of students, employers, and the society more generally through good quality higher education.
2. Institutional autonomy is critically important, tempered by a recognition that this brings with it heavy responsibilities.
3. External quality assurance has to be fit for purpose and to place only an appropriate and necessary burden on institutions for the achievement of their objectives.

1.3 Outputs and outcomes

The main outputs of these guidelines will be:
1. Standards to which all higher education institutions in Malawi must adhere.
2. A national agency (or agencies) with responsibility for assessing standards and accreditation in higher education.
3. A register of all accredited higher education institutions in Malawi.

4. Periodic review of all institutions through internal, external and national agency quality assurance processes.

The outcomes of implementing these guidelines will be:
1. Consistent standard of quality in higher education institutions in Malawi.
2. Higher education institutions and courses meeting defined quality standards.
3. Open discussion of viewpoints and experiences to further improve on quality higher education.
4. Improved mutual trust between all stakeholders in higher education.

Chapter 2.   Principles, purposes and objectives of internal and external quality assurance

These standards and guidelines are intended to assist providers in establishing, maintaining and improving quality assurance procedures which will meet the requirements of the National Council for Higher Education. They are based on best international practices, including policies and procedures to be operated by national quality assurance agencies and higher education and training institutions in Malawi. The standards reflect basic good practice in quality assurance. The guidelines explain in more detail the meaning and importance of the standards.

2.1   Basic principles

The standards and guidelines are based on a number of basic principles about quality assurance, both internal and external to higher education. These include:
1. Providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for quality assurance.
2. The interests of society in the quality of higher education need to be safeguarded.
3. The quality of academic programmes needs to be guaranteed.
4. Efficient and effective organizational structures and systems should be supportive of academic programmes.
5. Transparency and the use of external expertise in quality assurance processes are important.
6. A culture of quality should permeate higher education institutions.
7. Higher education institutions should demonstrate their relevance and accountability for the investment of public and private money.
8. Quality assurance processes should promote both accountability and quality enhancement.
9. Institutions should demonstrate their quality nationally and internationally.
10. Processes used should encourage diversity and innovation.

2.2   Purposes of the standards and guidelines

The purposes of the standards and guidelines are:
1. To improve the quality of education available to students in higher education institutions.
2. To assist higher education institutions in managing and enhancing their quality and, thereby, to help justify their competitiveness.
3. To make quality assurance and accreditation transparent and simple for all stakeholders to understand.

2.3   Objectives of the standards and guidelines

The objectives of the standards and guidelines are:
1. To ensure that the outcomes of higher education meet the expectations of students, employers, and other stakeholders.
2. To guide higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance.
3. To foster vibrant intellectual and educational achievement in higher education
4. To provide a common framework for quality assurance in higher education.

2.4 Internal quality assurance

These standards and guidelines call for internal quality assurance. Internal quality assurance provides the foundation for all quality assurance in higher education institutions. It includes institutional evaluations of different types, e.g. programme and course approval, monitoring and review, student assessment and staff performance appraisal. Internal quality assurance can be undertaken at institutional, faculty, department and programme levels, for the following purposes, among others:

1. Safeguarding institutional academic standards.
2. Preparation for accreditation of new programmes.
3. Self-assessment of performance by both students and staff.
4. Internationalisation of programmes.

2.5 External quality assurance

These standards and guidelines also call for external quality assurance. Such external evaluations largely depend for their full effectiveness on there being an explicit internal quality assurance strategy, with specific objectives. Furthermore they call for the use, within institutions, of mechanisms and methods aimed at achieving those objectives.

External quality assurance includes institutional evaluations of different types: subject or programme evaluations; accreditation at subject, programme and institutional levels; and combinations of these. Quality assurance can be undertaken by external agencies for a number of purposes, including:

1. Safeguarding national academic standards for higher education.
2. Accreditation of programmes and/or institutions.
3. User protection.
4. Public provision of independently-verified information (quantitative and qualitative) about programmes or institutions.
5. Improvement and enhancement of quality.

General principles of good practice in external quality assurance processes require the following:

1. Institutional autonomy should be respected.
2. The students and other stakeholders play a key role in quality assurance processes.
3. Use should be made, wherever possible, of the results of institutions' own internal quality assurance activities.

2.6 External quality assurance agencies

The activities of Malawi quality assurance agencies will reflect the legal, social and cultural requirements of the jurisdictions and environments in which they operate. Recommended Malawi standards relating to the quality assurance of quality assurance agencies themselves are contained in Part 3 of this document. The processes carried out by quality assurance agencies will properly depend upon their purposes and the outcomes they are intended to achieve. The procedures adopted by those agencies that are concerned to emphasize principally the enhancement of quality may be quite different from those whose function is first to provide strong consumer protection.

Chapter 3.   Malawian Standards and Guidelines

Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance in higher education institutions

1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance

Standard:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The policy, strategy, and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Guidelines:

The policy and procedures provide a framework within which higher education institutions can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. They also help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy. Policies contain the statements of intentions and the principal means by which these will be achieved. Procedural guidance can give more detailed information about the ways in which the policy is implemented and provides a useful reference point for those who need to know about the practical aspects of carrying out the procedures. The policy statement is expected to include:

    (a) The relationship between teaching and research in the institution.
    (b) The institution's strategy for quality and standards
    (c) The organization of the quality assurance system.
    (d) The responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties, and other organizational units and individuals for the assurance of quality.
    (e) The involvement of students in quality assurance, e.g. through course assessments.
    (f) The ways in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised, e.g. through tracer studies, periodic reviews, feedback from stakeholders, etc.

The realization of the NCHE quality assurance procedures depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes; and that there is full, timely and tangible recognition of the contribution to its work by those of its staff who demonstrate particular excellence, expertise and dedication. All higher education institutions should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students.

1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards

Standard:

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review, and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

Guidelines:

The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.

The quality assurance of programmes and awards is expected to include:
- (a) Development and publication of explicit learning outcomes for respective qualification levels.
- (b) Careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content.
- (c) Specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full time, part-time, distance learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional).
- (d) Availability of and equitable access to appropriate learning resources.
- (e) Formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme.
- (f) Monitoring of the progress and achievements of students, e.g. tracer studies and feedback from stakeholders.
- (g) Regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members).
- (h) Regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives, and other relevant organizations.
- (i) Participation of students in quality assurance activities.

1.3 Assessment of students

Standard:

Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

Guidelines:

The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and that it takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learner support. Student assessment procedures are expected to:
- (a) Be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives.
- (b) Be appropriate for their purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative.
- (c) Have clear and published criteria for marking.
- (d) Be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification.

(e) Where possible, not rely on the judgments of single examiners.

(f) Take account of all the possible consequences of examination regulations.

(g) Have clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances.

(h) Ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the institution's stated procedures;

(i) Be subject to administrative verification checks to ensure the accuracy of the procedures.

In addition, students should be clearly informed about the assessment strategy being used for their programme, what examinations or other assessment methods they will be subject to, what will be expected of them, and the criteria that will be applied to the assessment of their performance.

1.4 Quality assurance of academic staff

Standard:

Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved in teaching students are qualified and competent to do so. The staff and their competences are subject to those undertaking internal performance appraisal and external review.

Guidelines:

Teachers are the single most important learning resource available to most students. Teaching at a higher education institution includes lecturing, mentoring, supervision of research students, and also requires the ability to conduct independent research. It is important that those who teach have a full knowledge and understanding of the subject they are teaching, have the necessary skills and experience to transmit their knowledge and understanding effectively to students in a range of teaching contexts, and can access feedback on their own performance. Institutions should ensure that their staff recruitment and appointment procedures include a means of making certain that all new staff have at least the minimum necessary level of competence. Teaching staff should be given opportunities to develop and extend their teaching and research capacity and encouraged to value these skills. Institutions should provide underperforming academic staff with opportunities to improve their skills to an acceptable level and should have the means to dismiss them if they continue to be demonstrably ineffective.

1.5 Learning resources and student support

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered. No programme should be introduced if minimum learning resources and student support structures are not in place.

Guidelines:

In addition to their teachers, students rely on a range of resources to assist their learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries or computing facilities to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors, and other advisers. Learning resources and other support mechanisms should be readily accessible to students, designed with their needs in mind and responsive to feedback from those who use the services provided. Institutions should routinely monitor, review and improve the equity and effectiveness of the support services available to their students.

1.6 Information systems

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse, and make use of relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

Guidelines:

Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important that institutions have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Without this, they will not know what is working well and what needs attention, or the results of innovatory practices. The quality-related information systems required by individual institutions will depend to some extent on local circumstances, but they are at least expected to cover:

(a) Student progression and success rates.
(b) Employability of graduates.
(c) Students' satisfaction with their programmes.
(d) Effectiveness of teachers.
(e) Profile of the student population.
(f) Learning resources available and their costs.
(g) The institution's own key performance indicators.

There is also value in institutions comparing themselves with other similar organizations, nationally and internationally. This allows them to extend the range of their self-knowledge and to access possible ways of improving their own performance.

1.7 Public information

Standard:

Institutions should regularly publish up-to-date, impartial, and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

Guidelines:

In fulfilment of their public role, higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide information about the programmes they are offering, the intended learning outcomes of these, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning, and assessment procedures used, and the learning opportunities available to their students. Published information might also include the views and employment destinations of past students and the profile of the current student population. This information should be accurate, impartial, objective and readily accessible, and should not be used simply as a marketing opportunity. The institution should verify that it meets its own expectations in respect of impartiality and objectivity.

Part 2: Standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education institutions

2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures

Standard:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in *Standards for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions in Malawi.*

Guidelines:

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met. If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive.

2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes

Standard:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible, and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

Guidelines:

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used. As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

2.3 Criteria for decisions

Standard:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

Guidelines:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on evidence that has been recorded. However, agencies should have in place mechanisms for moderating conclusions based on management responses.

2.4 Processes fit for purpose

Standard:

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Guidelines:

Quality assurance agencies undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the utmost importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability, and usefulness, but also enhance quality assurance. Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

(a) the exercise of care in the selection of experts.
(b) insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
(c) the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
(d) the use of international experts;
(e) participation of students;
(f) ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
(g) the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;
(h) recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

2.5 Reporting

Standard:

External evaluation reports should be published and written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to their intended readership. Any decisions or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

Guidelines:

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone. In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) should have opportunities to comment on their usefulness.

2.6 Follow-up procedures

Standard:

External quality assurance processes which lead to recommendations for action should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Guidelines:

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny of events: it should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report. It should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

2.7 Periodic reviews

Standard:

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance. Normally the length of the cycle should be the length of the duration of the programme, but this should not exceed five years.

Guidelines:

Quality assurance is a dynamic, on-going process. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous review. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency, and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

2.8 System-wide analyses

Standard:

Quality assurance agencies should produce annual summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations and assessments.

Guidelines:

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice, and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness, and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

Part 3: Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies

3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

Standard:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2.

Guidelines:

The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained. It is important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies to the higher education institutions. The standards for external quality assurance should, together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies, constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

3.2 Official status

Standard:

External quality assurance agencies, whether local or international, should be formally recognized by competent public authorities in Malawi and have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of legislative jurisdictions in Malawi.

Guidelines:

This is a legal requirement.

3.3 Activities

Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities at institutional and/or programme level on a regular basis.

Guidelines:

Activities include evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities. These should be part of the core functions of the agency.

3.4 Resources

Standard:

Agencies should have adequate human and financial resources to enable them to organize and run their external quality assurance process(es) effectively and efficiently.

Guidelines:

The staff of external quality assurance agencies should have qualifications and competence commensurate with the assignment. They should also have the capacity to further develop the processes and procedures.

The agencies should demonstrate institutional transparency and accountability and financial viability.

3.5 Mission statement

Standard:

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available mission statement.

Guidelines:

The mission statement should describe the goals and objectives of the agency's quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of the work. The statement should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

3.6 Independence

Standard:

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

Guidelines:

An agency will need to demonstrate its independence in the following ways:
- (a) Its operational independence from higher education institutions and government is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts).
- (b) The definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from government, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence.
- (c) While relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

Standard:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:
- **(a) A self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process.**
- **(b) An external assessment by a group of experts, including e.g. student members and site visits, as decided by the agency.**
- **(c) Publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes.**
- **(d) A follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.**

Guidelines:

Agencies may develop and use processes and procedures for particular purposes. They should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on evidence that has been recorded. However, agencies should have in place mechanisms for moderating conclusions based on management responses.

3.8 Accountability procedures

Standard:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

Guidelines:

These procedures are expected to include the following:

(a) A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available in print and on its website.

(b) Documentation which demonstrates that:

  i. The agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance.

  ii. The agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts.

  iii. The agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties.

  iv. The agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism, an internal reflection mechanism, and an external feedback mechanism, in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.

(c) A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years.