

Internal Quality Assurance and Employability

How to strengthen the education–employment linkage

Overview

The rapid expansion of enrolment in the higher education sector worldwide has led to increasing graduate unemployment. This situation is pressuring higher education institutions (HEIs) to better align their education offers with labour market needs. Both governments and market competition have triggered the development of internal quality assurance (IQA) in higher education. While IQA aims primarily to improve the quality of teaching and learning, it can also enhance graduate employability.

University case studies from research on IQA conducted by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) analysed existing IQA practices and factors that condition the effectiveness of IQA in HEIs in eight countries. Based on research data, this brief explores how IQA can foster and integrate employability. It also presents strategies for universities and national authorities to improve employability using IQA tools and processes.

Why should IQA be concerned with graduate employability?

Enrolments in higher education worldwide have doubled from 100 million students in 2000, to 207 million in 2014. Economies and labour markets in many countries have failed to keep pace with an ever-growing number of university graduates, leading to higher levels of graduate unemployment. World Development Indicators data show that the proportion of unemployed people who have attained tertiary education increased between 2007 and 2013 in 46 countries (World Bank, 2017). In addition, numerous studies indicate a mismatch between the skills required in the labour market and the profiles of graduates (Allen and Weert, 2007).

This situation puts pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) to adapt their education and training to ensure students develop the skills and competences needed to enter the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012: 64). Higher education and graduate employability are interconnected, with employability concerns driving innovations in course design and delivery in many HEIs. These innovations involve work-based learning, entrepreneurship-related training, and support to graduates willing to engage in business start-ups. For this reason, it is important that graduate employability forms a central part of quality assurance (QA) agendas in HEIs. IIEP’s research demonstrated that IQA had an impact on the employability of graduates, either directly or indirectly, in the eight case universities. IQA helped to build a stronger relationship between academics and labour market representatives and facilitated discussions on curriculum content, pedagogies, and learning outcomes, as well as the future needs of employers. IQA helped programmes to develop clearer skill qualification profiles for graduates with employability-driven competencies. In addition, the existence of IQA measures enhanced graduate employability by creating a positive image of the quality of education provided by the university.



Daystar University, Kenya

Box 1. Defining employability

Understandings of employability vary within the literature. Yorke (2006) defines employability as ‘a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make graduates more employable and successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’. According to Brennan (2016), the relationship between higher education and employment is not only about ‘getting a first job’, but also about ‘doing that job’, ‘changing that job’, and ‘getting a different job’ in the future. In this view, graduate ‘employability’ involves, in addition to the skills to find a job, a mind-set of adaptability and flexibility and skills for life-long learning. Thus, IQA needs to be concerned with graduates’ futures and include the perspectives of graduates and employers, as well as of students and academic staff.

Tools to enhance graduate employability

IQA offers important opportunities for internal and external stakeholders to organize evidence-based dialogue on the quality and relevance of academic programmes. IIEP’s research in the eight case universities identified graduate tracer studies, employer satisfaction surveys, and job market analyses as IQA tools which fostered employability and facilitated the collection of information from graduates and employers.

Graduate tracer studies

Graduate tracer studies are the most commonly used IQA tool for the analysis of graduate employability. These surveys are used to investigate job market integration and employment conditions of graduates, and provide a comparison of employment level by field of specialization (and level of preparation of the graduates with regard to knowledge, skills, and attitudes required in the workplace). The frequency of tracer studies varied from annual to multi-annual. The studies were administered either by an external body on behalf of the university, by

a specialized unit at the university (e.g. a placement office or a career development service), or at the decentralized (faculty) level.

Nonetheless, implementers of graduate tracer studies frequently reported low response rates that reduced the reliability of data. In response, some universities used innovative methods to verify the data generated. At the Vienna University of Business Administration and Economics (WU), for instance, data from graduate labour market tracking surveys were compared with job-related information from the national social security database. Engaging with students before graduation and providing feedback from graduate tracer studies were also found to encourage students to provide data after graduation.

Employer surveys

Employer satisfaction surveys measure employers’ attitudes about graduate competencies and skills in the workplace. This IQA tool aims to obtain feedback from employers on the performance of graduates and, thereby, improve the quality and relevance of education at the university. Usually, satisfaction surveys focus on the strengths and weaknesses of individual graduates in terms of professional and cross-cutting skills (e.g. communication, teamwork, ethics, social responsibility, work readiness, and specialized knowledge and skills), compared with other university graduates. However, employers may also assess graduates with reference to a specific academic programme. In addition, universities may conduct in-depth interviews with employers to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives.

IIEP’s research found that data from employers often remained at the level of university management and administration, instead of being shared with academic staff and students. There were also challenges in ensuring that data on employer perspectives were collected from the ‘right’ employers, for example, the supervisors of interns who have first-hand contact with an institution’s students.

Box 2. An effective IQA instrument for employment at DU, Kenya

Daystar University (DU, a private university in Nairobi) conducted its first tracer study and employer survey in 2010, and a second in 2015. Its QA policy requires academic units to conduct tracer studies for recent graduates every 5 years. The surveys ask employers to rate DU graduates against other graduates, indicate strengths and weaknesses, and recommend skills for the labour market.

DU was rated the second-best university in Kenya for graduate employability. Its 2015 study revealed that most graduates found jobs within a year – much quicker than the national average of five years (British Council, 2014). DU’s use of employer surveys had a significant impact on teaching performance, positively influencing student assessment and learning conditions. DU attributes its success to an increasing involvement of academic staff in IQA instruments.

Box 3. Permanent programme advisory committees at UoB, Bahrain

The University of Bahrain (UoB) was created in 1986, from a merger of two pre-existing colleges, as the only national HEI in the Kingdom of Bahrain. As part of its IQA, UoB operates an annual programme and course assessment cycle that involves monitoring the progress of students' intended learning outcomes (ILOs). For this purpose, academic staff and programme heads prepare course or programme portfolios. The QA committee of each programme audits portfolio and programme ILOs annually.

To take employers' feedback into account, QA committees include a programme advisory sub-committee composed of alumni and employers. The advisory committees obtain feedback from external stakeholders on the relevance of programmes through employer/alumni surveys. There is an annual meeting, at which employers' opinions and suggestions on programme effectiveness are gathered, and modifications are suggested to the department council. The committees also perform market research and analyses to identify changes in employers' expectations or labour market standards.

Job market analyses

Job market analysis is performed either during study programme design to reflect labour market needs, or in existing programmes to identify job opportunities for graduates. The data on job availability can be gathered directly from labour market surveys or from on- and off-line (e.g. open days, internships) sources. Results may be distributed through annual reports on job markets and employment opportunities for graduating students. Job market analysis can be conducted at the faculty level, or at a job placement office, if it exists. Depending on the responsible unit, the purpose and use of the analysis can vary. When the job market analysis is conducted at the decentralized level, for example, its results are

applied to improve the relevance of programmes and/or the effectiveness of the faculty or department.

In general, the results of these tools are used to improve study programmes or student support services (e.g. job-placement services), or both, with the ultimate aim to enhance student employability. See *Box 2* for an example of how these tools are used at Daystar University (DU) in Kenya.

Recommendations: How to enhance employability

IIEP's research on IQA identified several strategies for HEIs to strengthen their IQA activities on employability.

Involving external stakeholders

Employers and graduates are increasingly involved in study programme design and review. They may participate in the self-study process as part of a programme review exercise, or in an external review team. Employers may also provide informal feedback on the competencies of graduates or interns under their supervision. Employer involvement in curriculum review may be formalized through participation in standing committees for study programme content revision. For instance, at the American International University – Bangladesh (AIUB), the chief executives and human resource managers of selected companies contribute to academic review procedures by participating in multi-sectoral committees organized by the faculty of business. In the review process at the University of Bahrain (UoB), employers' suggestions are also considered during programme development and revision (see *Box 3*). Shortcomings to external stakeholder participation include the limited availability of employers and their possibly short-sighted vision of the labour market, which is often driven by immediate needs.

Box 4. Quality conferences at UDE in Germany

The University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) – which resulted from the merger of Duisburg and Essen universities in 2003 – is a large public research university. It formally established IQA in 2004 with the creation of the Centre of Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE). One of its main functions is to decentralize and use data to support discussions on improving the quality and relevance of study programmes. All data from course evaluations and compulsory graduate tracer studies are compiled by CHEDQE and made available to faculties and departments annually. The faculties then organize annual quality conferences (days of teaching), at which the faculty community is invited to discuss quality improvements. Reports on the findings of these conferences are transferred to the department of planning, the Deputy Vice Chancellor for academic affairs, and the deans of faculties. Quality conferences have been effective at creating change at the study programme level.

Promoting discussion of employability within HEIs

IQA mechanisms are used by university stakeholders to discuss employability issues, as academic staff remain responsible for providing graduates with relevant skills for the labour market. Within each HEI, this process requires negotiations between academic staff and employers to balance potentially contrasting perspectives. In some cases, these negotiations are organized in the form of a 'quality dialogue' that takes place either at faculty or department level (see *Box 4*).

Balancing multiple perspectives

IIEP's research on IQA has demonstrated that the opinions of alumni and employers on the relevance of academic programmes can be systematically compiled using IQA instruments and processes. The research showed that these perspectives are helpful for revising the content coverage of study programmes. Employers should be involved in the design and review of study programmes and should provide regular inputs on what skills are needed and how to develop them. At the same time, both IQA and academic staff need to be aware of how to balance the design and

revision of study programmes with the skills and competencies necessary for graduates to find employment and those needed in order to remain employable throughout their professional career. Therefore, while employer participation in programme design and review is considered a good practice, it is necessary to keep in mind its limits when interpreting survey findings and making changes to study programmes. Employers' needs tomorrow may not be the same as their current needs, and universities should focus on providing students with a broad knowledge base and generic competencies useful throughout a graduate's working life.

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