

Internal Quality Assurance in Regional Universities in Azerbaijan *

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* The researcher thanks Nakhchivan State University, Sumgait State University, and Lankaran State University for contributing material to the study.

Internal Quality Assurance in Regional Universities in Azerbaijan

Abstract: This study explores how regional universities, in Azerbaijan successfully put internal quality assurance (IQA) measures into practice. Regional universities face many challenges in implementing IQA measures effectively. These challenges call for new ideas, and recommendations to improve the effectiveness of existing IQA frameworks. A multi-method qualitative approach is used in this study to scrutinize the efficacy of existing IQA mechanisms and propose strategies for enhancement. In this study, we explore the IQA frameworks, policies, and practices in universities, within regions, through the research survey, university website, and document reviews. The stakeholders of the regional universities, including but not limited to heads of departments, faculty members, and students, provide insights into their experiences, perceptions, and recommendations regarding IQA implementation. The study identifies critical success factors for effective IQA implementation in regional universities, including institutional leadership commitment, faculty empowerment, student involvement, and strategic partnerships with relevant stakeholders. Recommendations are provided to address identified gaps and enhance IQA practices, emphasizing the importance of institutional capacity building, policy coherence, and continuous improvement processes. By strengthening IQA measures in regional universities, Azerbaijan can foster a culture of excellence, enhance student learning outcomes, and bolster institutional reputation and competitiveness on both national and global scales. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on IQA in higher education, offering actionable insights tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities encountered in regional university contexts within Azerbaijan.

Keywords: internal quality assurance, strategies in quality assurance, challenges in quality assurance, Azerbaijani regional universities, IQAinAR.

I. Introduction

In the landscape of higher education in Azerbaijan, the pursuit of quality assurance has become increasingly paramount (Suleymanov, 2020). On 29th of April, 2019, the Accreditation and Nostrification Department of the Ministry of Education was reorganized into the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (ABOUT THE AGENCY, 2024) with the status of a public legal entity under the Ministry of Education. The document analysis showed that the agency's indicator list is based on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG_2015.pdf). According to Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area universities should have their own IQA. Thanks to some projects, IQAs are established in most Azerbaijani universities. IQAinAR (About IQAinAR, n.d.) was one of the IQA-related projects in Azerbaijan. This Erasmus+ project aims to contribute to the enhancement and development of the internal quality assurance in HEIs in two Partner countries - Azerbaijan and Russia with international (EU) quality standards as a benchmark while at the same time strengthening the HEIs towards local, regional, and national policies and strategies implementation. Nakhchivan State University, a regional university with over 500 international students, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, and Azerbaijan Technical University, universities that are located in the capital city, joined the IQAinAR project (Partners |

IQA in AR, n.d.) to enhance their IQA frameworks. As part of the project, all the partner Azerbaijani universities are required to implement the pilot phase of IQA using the indicators from the indicator list that is made as an outcome of the project. Universities chose 5 – 8 indicators for the pilot phase. The observation showed that universities that are located in the capital city and ones that do not have the same opportunities in terms of human resources, availability of transportation options, etc. The research mainly focuses on finding if there are any specific challenges or strategies in regional universities like Nakhchivan State University, Sumgait State University, and Lankaran State University, regarding effective IQA implementation. This study aims to identify the role and effectiveness of internal quality assurance in the regional universities of Azerbaijan. To support this aim, the following objectives are formulated:

- a) to identify how regional universities approach internal quality assurance
- b) to discuss and summarize the challenges faced by regional universities
- c) to explore and develop effective strategies/recommendations to overcome or mitigate these challenges

The main research question is: How can regional universities in Azerbaijan overcome challenges for an effective internal quality assurance implementation?

The sub-research questions are:

1. How do regional universities approach internal quality assurance?
2. What are the challenges faced by regional universities in the implementation of IQA practices and principles?
3. What are effective strategies/recommendations to overcome or mitigate these challenges?

II. Literature Review

Quality assurance in higher education is the process of routine reviewing and evaluation of educational procedures and results of academic performance to allow for keeping the measures at the required level. This section aims to summarize the key results of the literature studies and keep track of trends in the implementation of the internal quality assurance mechanisms in regionally located universities of Azerbaijan. The present research determines that the researchers have never conducted IQA in Azerbaijani regional universities, and they only shed light on the starting point of IQA generally, but not specifically for the regional universities in Azerbaijan. The review will emphasize quality assurance, the importance of quality assurance culture, the transformation of the Azerbaijani educational system, the launch of an internal QA system in Azerbaijani universities, challenges, methodologies of IQA in Azerbaijani universities, and possible future research topics.

II.1. *Quality Assurance, Importance of Quality Culture and Stakeholder Engagement*

Williams & Harvey (2015) demonstrate how quality assurance in post-secondary education has developed over the years from low to high complexity, which clearly shows that it is a challenge to our usual perception and definition of quality. According to the researchers, there is a need for constant monitoring to ensure that this process of improvement continues to happen. This process of quality assurance must be based on clear and transparent aims and approaches from those managing quality assurance methods. By sharing the core principles of research, policy, and implementation, it

brings out the symbiotic role between academia and international networking through dialogues.

However, gaps remain. The majority of research on the relationship between quality assurance practices in institutions, and whether the implementers are knowledgeable about the underlying theory, struggle to provide evidence for its influence so far. There is a lack of representation in support staff experiences although these contribute significantly to the work validity and quality. There is also little sufficient research done on any such discrepancies that may occur between national quality assurance agencies and their priorities. The disputes arise because of different perceptions of a unitary concept of quality assurance, what with critiquing a simple copy and paste of models from other countries and all the disciplinary silos getting in the way of us fully appreciating a holistic understanding.

While numerous researches are available on the mentioned dimensions, there's yet little known about the total effect of quality assurance on the sector. The fact is that the vast majority of researchers are like this, i.e., their value lies more in their telling and learning than in research findings. That's why there will be more evaluation-oriented approaches to quality assurance and more profound research on the influences of facilities and the student experience as a minimum requirement. The majority of researchers focus on certain aspects in isolation rather than formulating holistic descriptions, and so calls for more thoroughness and reflection emerge.

Beerken & Udam (2017) claim that participants in the higher education process represent quite often few points of view and desires, which turn out to be purposeless of consensual character. The researchers note that effectively engaging the stakeholders requires stakeholders to have excellent communication and compromise skills. There may be occasionally a conflict, though it could be a case of the ever-changing weather perspective or the responsibility of the government. The Estonian quality assurance agency focuses on individual targeting of educational quality improvement for universities, while institutional accreditation is bound to strategic, quality culture, and education outcomes within an institution. Stakeholder involvement may lift quality assurance standards, but it may also cause discretion that is undesirable for the system's consistent basis. The stakeholder engagement might just enhance the existing discourse but will never serve in the living for a clear and practical vision and leadership. On the whole, it may endorse and give birth to the leadership and grow out of common ground.

II.2. *Transformation of the Education System in Azerbaijan*

Suleymanov (2020) researched to find out how the higher education system in Azerbaijan has undergone many significant changes in government policies and global market trends. Possibly, the biggest innovations are the newfound law and the conditions in line with European standards. Now the main concerns of higher education policy are improving quality in higher education, incorporating accountability and competitiveness principles in the processes of educational institutions. Increasing university entry fees, regional rivalry, more attention to international ratings, exposing students to different cultures via exchange programs and adopting double degrees, increasing English-based education, introducing an integration strategy, selling techniques, and going through accreditation processes are among the main trends. Unexpectedly, there has been a rise in multi-faceted research universities, online learning, and greater input from institutions in the making of education policies. These

reforms are supposed to keep the system up-to-date and still relevant to, and able to fulfill the needs of the Azerbaijani society (Suleymanov, 2020).

Suleymanov (2020) also stresses the necessity of quality assessment measures for the educational institutions of Azerbaijan which can be achieved by such means as the international rankings, the growth of the internationalization, the increasing online learning, and the introduction of information technologies. The above-mentioned disparities tend to address developing the quality assessment processes that ensure and enhance the level of education in state universities of Azerbaijan.

II.3. *Establishment of IQA in Azerbaijani universities*

Mammadova & Huseynov (2019) researched to find out how IQAs are established in Azerbaijan. In 2017 a project related to IQA was selected for funding by the European Union. 11 Azerbaijan universities are partners in this project. At the training at the University of Royal Technology, SMK University of Lithuania, Middlesex University in London, and Alekante University of Spain partner developed their knowledge and ability in Quality Assurance, Evaluation, and Assessment processes. Training is also based on learning outcomes, developing education programs, and Bloom Taxonomy as well. It is most often used when designing educational, training, and learning processes.

The specific objectives of the project are:

- To make a comparative analysis of current QA practices
- To develop a framework for quality assurance mechanisms in Azerbaijan higher education institutions.
- To increase awareness of modern quality assurance tools and policies
- To develop and establish a common Quality Assurance System - ISO 9001.
- To create an online platform and user service charter
- To enhance the Quality Assurance Culture
- To train quality assurance-related administrative and academic staff
- Develop a Model of Principles, Priorities, Guidelines, and Procedures for internal management of QA for partner HEIs

To achieve these objectives systematic activities and implementation strategy was designed. A strong and articulated quality assurance plan is needed, as compliance with EU standards is key for the success of the project. Taking up the wider objectives of Establishing and improving the Quality Assurance Centers in Azerbaijan HEIs, the project will support the exchange of knowledge and experience by increasing the exposure of the universities to European education standards, ESG. Improving the qualification of staff in Azerbaijan will raise the quality of administration at the universities by assuring the quality on the one hand and the development of international cooperation in the larger society on the other (Mammadova & Huseynov, 2019).

II.4. *Current Practices, Challenges, and Strategies for IQA in Azerbaijan*

Ilyasov, Imanova, Mushtagov, & Sadigova (2023) stress the need for modernizing IQA in Azerbaijan. It is well noted that developing a competitive workforce equipped for the 21st-century job market is a key long-term goal for Azerbaijan's higher education system. To achieve this, modernizing quality assurance processes is critical. Ilyasov, Imanova, Mushtagov, & Sadigova (2023) examine quality assurance in

Azerbaijan's higher education through the lens of its legal framework, European quality standards, and current legislation. It then proposes recommendations for improvement. They also explore how universities around the world are modernizing quality assurance practices. This provides universities with practical and theoretical suggestions to bridge the gap between graduate qualifications and employer needs, ultimately fostering a globally competitive workforce.

Mushtagov (2021) emphasizes four key factors crucial for quality assurance in higher education: investment levels, teaching staff competence, applicant and graduate standards, and curriculum content. Implementing successful quality assurance systems requires adherence to the PDCA Cycle—Plan, Do, Check, Act—updating policies, academic programs, and teaching methods accordingly. Continuous monitoring and improvement are essential, focusing on student-centered teaching, core competency acquisition, and dynamic academic staff. Evaluations, including student satisfaction surveys and input from various stakeholders, are vital. Curriculum design should prioritize skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, and agility, alongside discipline-specific knowledge. Integration of technology and digital learning methods is essential for producing versatile graduates. Establishing a quality culture involves clarity, simplicity, focus, and accountability, with active student involvement and robust graduate tracking systems. Program accreditation processes are crucial, promoting targeted competency acquisition. Integrated information systems are necessary for effective quality assurance, facilitating data exchange, and institutional identity alignment. Ultimately, students, organizations, and governments are identified as pivotal stakeholders in shaping higher education quality. However, the research doesn't provide any unique successful initiative conducted by a university. And despite the four key factors mentioned, the location of the university like being located in the capital city or the other regions of Azerbaijan is not emphasized.

II.5. *Future Research Directions and Conceptual Framework*

The internal quality assurance system represents the key component in this process that guarantees the effectiveness of the higher education system in the context of a fast-changing environment. This review has been conducted to determine the IQA status in Azerbaijan and to understand the role of regionally located universities. Even though there are no research results that would directly refer to IQA implementation in these organizations, there is substantial progress that has been made in creating a national framework for quality assurance in higher education.

The reforms of the higher education system of Azerbaijan are driven by globalization, student-centered learning, and the need to prepare graduates with competitive skills. Implementing appropriate IQA mechanisms is not only a necessity for realizing those goals but also for ensuring the quality of education which may vary from that of the capital city universities which may face unique challenges.

This review highlighted several key aspects related to IQA in Azerbaijan:

- The need to develop a precise quality concept and to build a strong quality culture in universities.
- The key stakeholders that play a vital role in the success of the endeavor are the students, the faculty, the government agencies, and the employers.
- The successful outcome of the EU-funded project in training Azerbaijani universities in the use of modern quality assurance tools and approaches.
- The main objective of IQA is to create a competitive labor market where graduates can acquire the skills and knowledge required by their employers.

For all this, a big hole is observed in the research on the application of IQA practices in the regional universities of Azerbaijan in particular. This area of research should be given attention in the future by investigating the special problems and benefits that these organizations have in the implementation of IQA. Furthermore, carrying out research on effective IQA practices in other universities with the same regional structure and implementable in the Azerbaijani context could be a source of ideas.

Considering the research is limited in IQA in Azerbaijani HEIs and more specifically there is only one research on regional universities, the literature regarding quality assurance, the importance of QA culture, stakeholder engagement, the transformation of Azerbaijani education system, the establishment of IQAs, current practices, challenges, and strategies for IQA in Azerbaijan are reviewed. The review showed us approaches in QA, challenges, and strategies. So, the research questions are created based on these concepts of IQA. The literature, concepts, and research questions are all linked (see Fig. 1).

In conclusion, IQA is becoming more and more accepted as a crucial part of the successful higher education system in Azerbaijan. However, the development of such a national framework is still a work in progress, and the support of its effective implementation, particularly in regional universities, is the main issue.

III. Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology is used to explore how universities approach quality assurance within their academic programs and administrative processes. The methodology utilizes a multi-method approach, combining various qualitative data analysis techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. These will be explained below.

III.1. *Data Collection*

The stratified random sampling method (Singh & Mangat, 1996) is used to determine sample universities and stakeholders who will answer the questions regarding the IQA. A regional university is one that is not located in the capital city, Baku. So their geographic location is important in this case. That is why, 3 regional universities were chosen for the research, one closest to Baku, another that has the longest distance from Baku, and one in the middle. Nakhchivan State University is a regional university in Azerbaijan that has the longest distance from the capital city, Baku. Sumgait State University is also considered a regional university in Azerbaijan. It is the closest one to Baku. Lankaran State University on the other hand is located middle distance. Stakeholders are chosen randomly because the main matter in this study is not the size or position of the stakeholders, but the geographic location of the university.

The primary method is an online form with 9 open-ended questions. All questions are pilot-tested, and also being reviewed by QA managers and specialists. Online forms are chosen rather than online interviews to reach more stakeholders of the regional HEIs in a short time. A pre-defined set of open-ended questions in the online form allows participants to elaborate on their experiences and insights (see Questions). The secondary data collection method for this study is reviewing IQA-related documents of the universities by directly requiring the documents from the university representatives or getting them through universities' websites.

III.2. *Data Analysis*

A combination of qualitative data analysis techniques or methods including content analysis, coding, narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is employed to analyze the answers to the open-ended form questions. Content Analysis is used to identify key themes and patterns (e.g., themes related to student involvement in quality assurance for question 4) in how universities approach quality assurance (research sub-question 1) across the research survey questions 1, 4, and 8 (see Annex A). Responses are based on the specific focus of each question. The coding method is used to systematically identify and categorize specific challenges (research sub-question 2), opportunities, and strategies (research sub-question 3) mentioned by participants in response to questions 2 and 3 (see Annex A). Narrative analysis is used to analyze the stories and experiences shared by participants regarding student involvement and feedback mechanisms (research sub-question 1) in quality assurance focusing on understanding the participants' perspectives and experiences. (question 4, see Annex A). Phenomenological analysis is used to delve into the lived experiences and perceptions of participants regarding successful quality assurance initiatives (research sub-question 3) (question 5, see Annex A). This explores the subjective meanings participants attach to these initiatives. Discourse analysis is used to analyze the language used by participants to uncover the underlying ideologies and beliefs surrounding continuous improvement and innovation in quality assurance (question 6, see Annex A). IPA method is used to explore the subjective interpretations and experiences of participants regarding support and resources provided for quality assurance activities (question 7, see Annex A) and their opinions on quality assurance (the main research question) in general (question 9, see Annex A). IPA delves deeper into the meaning-making process of participants.

III.3. *Data Rigor*

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, several strategies are employed. Survey answers are shared with participants for verification and to ensure their perspectives are accurately represented (member checking method by McKim (2023)). Data collected from different sources (an online form that contains questionnaires for the research, university websites, and IQA-related documents) are used to corroborate and enrich the findings. Moreover, the researcher maintains a reflexive journal to document their assumptions and biases throughout the research process. This multi-method approach offers a nuanced understanding of university approaches to quality assurance by capturing both the common themes and the unique experiences of individual participants. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews are conducted with heads of QA departments to verify the accuracy of the data collected. Additionally, IQA-related documents from universities are analyzed to enhance the reliability of the findings.

III.4. *Limitation*

Despite being a qualitative study, the information is gathered by inviting university stakeholders to complete an online form to ensure anonymity and reliable responses. The form is disseminated using official communication channels of the universities.

While the research received a sufficient response rate (86.6% of all responses) from Nakhchivan State University, participation from Sumgait State University and Lankaran State University was low. We got 26 responses from NSU while only 4 responses came from SSU and LSU. This uneven participation across universities limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider Azerbaijani higher education landscape. To address this issue, the secondary data collection method is used; IQA documents and websites of these universities are analyzed to gain more data.

IV. Results

The investigation into the implementation of Quality Assurance (QA) measures in Azerbaijani regional universities has yielded valuable insights into the current landscape of QA practices and challenges. Through the survey conducted among stakeholders of Nakhchivan State University (NSU), Sumgait State University(SSU), and Lankaran State University(LSU) and document analysis of the QA framework in these universities, several findings have emerged. This study aims to identify how Azerbaijani regional universities approach IQA and to gather all the different challenges, strategies, and successful initiatives related to IQA in Azerbaijani regional universities.

IV.1. *How do regional universities approach internal quality assurance?*

In Azerbaijani regional universities, there is a QA commission which consists of all or some of the university stakeholders. The stakeholders' opinions are important, but they can't replace good leadership with a clear vision (Beerens & Udam, 2017). Most of the stakeholders are engaged in IQA-related projects through these commissions and the others who are not the commission members can still attend IQA surveys to show their needs and perspectives.

The analysis points out that there is no mechanism for reporting the effectiveness of the IQA measures. Universities have an action plan where they set KPIs and quality indicators for any action, but there is not a clear report where we can see the overall effectiveness of IQA measures.

IV.2. *What are the challenges faced by regional universities in the implementation of IQA practices and principles?*

Regional universities in Azerbaijan have their own QA policy, but the investigations show that there is still a need for further improvements in the policies. According to the survey, the main challenge was a lack of QA culture at NSU and LSU. The previous analysis by Mammadova & Huseynov (2019) proved the same for Sumgait State University too. Furthermore, the absence of a QA culture within Azerbaijani regional universities emerged as a significant barrier to effective QA implementation. The lack of familiarity with QA principles and practices among faculty, staff, and students hindered the integration of QA initiatives into the institutional ethos. This dearth of QA culture impeded efforts to promote continuous improvement and accountability in academic endeavors.

Other challenges were the “Evolution of QA Structures”, “Focus only on Teaching”, “Limited Availability of QA Experts”, “Language Barrier embedding knowledge Exchange”, and “Discrepancies in Awareness Among Regional Universities”.

The analysis of the legal documents of the universities revealed the evolution of QA structures within Azerbaijani regional universities over the past two years. Initially, QA departments operated under the control of the Education department. During the initial stages of QA implementation, a significant emphasis was placed on teaching and educational aspects within Azerbaijani regional universities. QA departments primarily concentrated their efforts on ensuring the quality of teaching delivery, curriculum design, and assessment practices. However, this narrow focus limited the incorporation of other vital dimensions of academic quality, such as research activities and internationalization efforts, into the QA framework. Moreover, the transformation of the Azerbaijani education system and QA best practices requires universities to have IQAs as separate departments (Suleymanov, 2020), not something like “sub-departments”. As noted by one of the respondents: “A good QA department should operate independently” (AZ5).

The regional nature of Azerbaijani universities posed challenges in recruiting qualified QA experts. The geographic location of these institutions made it difficult to attract experienced professionals in the field, further complicating the development and execution of comprehensive QA strategies. The scarcity of QA experts significantly impacted the effectiveness of QA implementation within regional universities, limiting the breadth and depth of QA practices.

The language barrier emerged as another critical obstacle in the dissemination of QA practices among regional universities in Azerbaijan. Limited proficiency in foreign languages among university staff hindered their access to resources and knowledge-sharing opportunities related to QA. This language constraint exacerbated difficulties in fostering cross-institutional collaboration and hindered the adoption of best practices from other universities, both domestically and internationally.

The challenges reported by universities are not location-specific challenges. The only challenge that is location-specific yet reported is the lack of experts.

While detailed survey data were available for NSU, comprehensive data from other regional universities were lacking due to their non-participation in the surveys. However, anecdotal observations suggested lower levels of awareness regarding QA measures in these institutions compared to NSU. This discrepancy underscored potential disparities in institutional readiness and capacity for QA implementation across the region.

IV.3. What are effective strategies/recommendations to overcome or mitigate these challenges?

IQA is a popular topic for Azerbaijani universities, so they all devise strategies for improving their IQAs. In the Strategic Development Plan 2023 - 2027 of Nakhchivan State University, there is one goal specifically for improving IQA. The goal is: “Involve stakeholders in QA processes and update policies for a better IQA framework” (NSU, 2023).

Another important challenge reported is the language barrier at NSU. But Nakhchivan State University has created the IELTS and SAT exam center to motivate its students and teachers to learn English and get their international certificate without going anywhere else.

The second successful initiative is switching to differential salary. Generally, the salaries in Azerbaijani universities are fixed, but the transformation of the Azerbaijani education system (Suleymanov, 2020) makes it important to switch to differential salary, meaning you will get more if you have done your job at high quality. The results

of the research survey show that university staff like to have differential salaries, but they want all of their metrics to be considered for evaluation rather than considering only research achievements.

In Azerbaijan, there is a specific project related to HEIs. According to the SABAH project (SABAH Qrupları, 2024), the students with good results start studying these specific courses starting from the second year of their study. NSU has started a new SABAH group course for medical science. As the students of the group will only be chosen based on their academic performance, this specific initiative is the best one to improve the quality of the course and subjects.

NSU, SSU, and LSU disseminate all of their satisfaction surveys through social media. This one is considered a successful initiative by the majority of the stakeholders. However, one respondent (AZ24) expressed a different perspective: “When sending the satisfaction survey via the internet, no one (the respondent means the QA department which is responsible for conducting satisfaction surveys) thinks if everyone participates in the survey, whether they (the respondent means the teachers and students who are invited to participate in the satisfaction surveys) have internet access or not?”

V. Discussion

The findings from the surveys conducted among stakeholders of Nakhchivan State University (NSU), Lankaran State University (LSU), and Sumgait State University (SSU) provide valuable insights into the implementation and effectiveness of Quality Assurance (QA) measures in Azerbaijani regional universities. The challenges faced by regional universities in Azerbaijan are generally related to QA culture. The issue has also been mentioned in many previous researches (Mammadova & Huseynov, 2019) (Mushtagov, 2021). The initial stages of QA implementation were characterized by a narrow focus on teaching and educational aspects, with QA departments primarily concentrating their efforts in these areas. Universities have strategic plans, however, the limited availability of QA experts poses a significant challenge to the comprehensive implementation of QA strategies, particularly in institutions located in remote regions. The lack of familiarity with QA principles and practices among the stakeholders including faculty, staff, and students contributed to the slow uptake and integration of QA measures beyond teaching-related activities. The need for research-minded people was the biggest issue in the universities in remote regions, as the majority of the researchers lived in Baku, the capital city. Additionally, the language barrier emerged as another significant impediment, preventing university staff from accessing resources and learning from the QA experiences of other institutions, both domestically and internationally.

An initiative of making online satisfaction surveys and disseminating them over social media is considered a successful initiative by many stakeholders while it is considered a non-complete attempt by some of them. The non-supporters of this initiative claimed that not everyone has full access to social media, so disseminating satisfaction surveys over the Internet is not enough. The strategies and initiatives to improve IQA effectiveness by universities can be further enhanced if a specific committee that has members from each of the regional universities is created.

Despite the challenges were almost the same in the regional HEIs as seen in Table 1, but the strategies were different (see Table 2). The main reason for this is that HEIs in remote regions didn't collaborate to find out solution. Addressing these challenges will require collaborative initiatives among university administrators, policymakers, and

stakeholders to build capacity, foster a culture of quality assurance, and promote knowledge sharing and collaboration across institutions.

Regional universities in Azerbaijan can tackle internal quality assurance challenges by investing in staff training and involving everyone in the process. Aligning with international standards and using technology for better management will also help. Building a culture of continuous improvement is key to making these efforts sustainable.

VI. Conclusion

The challenges identified in the implementation of Quality Assurance measures in Azerbaijani regional universities highlight the need for concerted efforts to enhance QA capacity and effectiveness. The scarcity of qualified QA experts, the absence of a QA culture, and language barriers present significant obstacles to the comprehensive implementation of QA strategies in these higher education institutions. While detailed survey data were available for NSU, comprehensive data from other regional universities were lacking due to their non-participation in the surveys. However, anecdotal observations suggested lower levels of awareness regarding QA measures in these institutions compared to NSU. This discrepancy underscored potential disparities in institutional readiness and capacity for QA implementation across the region. By prioritizing QA implementation and actively working towards overcoming the identified barriers, Azerbaijani regional universities can enhance their academic standards, reputation, and contribution to national and global higher education systems.

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Annexes

A) Questions

The questions below are answered by the stakeholders of the sample universities during the research data collection period.

1. How does your university currently approach quality assurance within its academic programs and administrative processes?
2. What are the unique challenges or opportunities that your university faces in implementing quality assurance measures, considering its regional context?
3. What specific strategies or initiatives have your university implemented to address quality assurance concerns within their faculty and staff?
4. How does your university involve students in the quality assurance process, and what mechanisms are in place for collecting and addressing their feedback?
5. What are examples of successful quality assurance initiatives or improvements that have been implemented at your university in recent years?
6. How does your university promote a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in its approach to quality assurance?
7. What support and resources does your university provide to faculty and staff to facilitate their participation in quality assurance activities?
8. How does your university measure the impact and effectiveness of its quality assurance efforts, and what metrics or indicators are used for evaluation?
9. What are your opinions regarding IQA in Azerbaijani regional universities?

Figures and Tables

Figure 1) *Conceptual Framework*

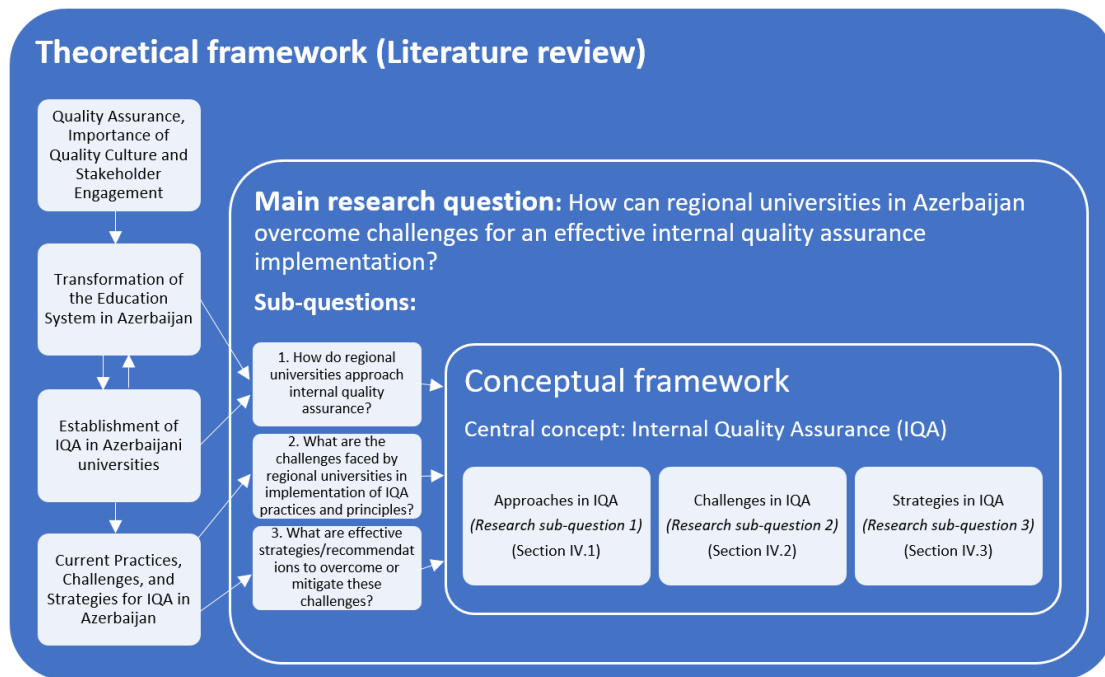


Table 1) *Challenges in regional HEIs of Azerbaijan*

Challenges	Scope
The absense of QA culture	Common
Low awareness of the topic	Common
The lack of research-minded people	Specific
Language barrier	Common
Evolution of QA Structures	Common
Focus only on Teaching	Common
Limited Availability of QA Experts	Specific

Table 2) *The strategies and successful initiatives in Azerbaijani regional universities*

Strategies	Implemented by
Differential salaries	All
Establishment of IELTS and SAT centers	NSU
Opening SABAH Group course	NSU
Disseminating satisfaction surveys	All
Improving IQA is a part of the university's strategic development plan	NSU