Stakeholders' Perceptions and Challenges of Internal Quality Assurance: Lessons from Two Higher Education Institutions for Enhancing Quality Systems

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Abstract

The dynamism and interconnectedness of global educational landscape sees the necessity of robust internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms within higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to ensure high quality, relevant, efficient and effective teaching, learning and assessment. The aim of this research is to investigate the stakeholders' perceptions of IQA in two HEIs and explore challenges in implementing standard European IQA best practices. The findings provide insights that can inform quality improvement strategies in HEIs across Europe and beyond.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach including literature review, survey and interview. Participants include students, alumni, faculty, employers and IQA experts. The findings revealed both HEIs have robust IQA practices with strengths in different categories but also weak areas in which each HEI can work on. The interviews with IQA experts uncovered several challenges in implementing IQA such as lack of pervasive quality culture, poor communication, and resource constraints. Although recent developments in Artificial Intelligence technologies can offer benefits for IQA, faculty training on using AI tools is essential.

This study added fresh perspectives to the discourse on QA in higher education institutions globally and in Europe specifically. It contributed significantly to the literature on international educational collaboration and internal quality assurance.

Keywords

Internal Quality Assurance, Quality Education, Higher Education, Stakeholders in Education, IQA practices, Challenges in IQA Implementation, Azerbaijani Higher Education, Stakeholders' Engagement

Introduction

The global higher education (HE) landscape is increasingly characterised by a pursuit for quality and excellence as well as accountability and transparency, compelling Higher Education institutions (HEIs) to develop comprehensive Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems and procedures ((Dill, 2007; Krooi, et al., 2024). HEIs worldwide are continuously evolving to ensure they produce graduates who are competitive in the global labour market (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2023; Scandurra, et al., 2023). IQA has become an essential agenda item in many HE systems, considering it as the main effective tool to monitor, improve and enhance the requisite standard or quality of the education process in order to ensure high quality human capital output (Ilyasov, et al., 2023; Lim, 1999). Implementing IQA in HEIs is a complex process due to numerous and oftentimes, complicated guidelines and conditions. However, HEIs must learn to adopt and adapt these frameworks to fit their unique HEI contexts and national requirements (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008)

Many countries joined the Bologna Process to enable them to integrate into the European education field and set up an accreditation system equivalent to that of the European HEIs. While the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards have been widely adopted, challenges in IQA implementation persist across various HEIs. A robust IQA system appears to be crucial in order to improve the quality of education and preparing students for the highly competitive global labour market searching for top talent. The quality of education remains a critical concern, compounded by the lack of sufficient data on how the key stakeholders perceive the quality of education delivery and related aspects at these HEIs. There is indeed a pressing need to evaluate how stakeholders perceive the quality of education at these HEIs in order to evaluate the efficacy of the IQA frameworks, if any. Understanding stakeholders' perspectives on IQA systems can offer critical insights into how HEIs can enhance QA processes (Sheila, et al., 2021). This stakeholder-driven approach is imperative as it provides direct insights into the IQA of the institutions and the quality of education in general and will help to uncover specific challenges in adapting and implementing IQA systems (Tang & Hussin, 2011; Beerkens & Udam, 2017). To be able to identify the gaps in the implementation of these QA systems will be significant in finding solutions to enhance the educational standards and meet international benchmarks (Graham, et al., 2023).

Azerbaijan, as a case study, offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing robust IQA systems that are aligned with European standards. Ilyasov *et al*. (2023) noted in their research findings that a preliminary assessment of the legal framework in AZ shows some limitations by local HEIs when implementing the normal standard's requirements. This is due to the many barriers towards adherence to the ten European standards on IQA specified in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), for example the lack of necessary autonomy of universities, potentially weak internal communication (autocratic communication and directive approach are still prevalent) and lack of public awareness (Mammadova & Huseynov, 2019). Furthermore, there are many challenges in strategic planning in HEIs due to lack of good leadership, lack of necessary resources, resistance to change, and inadequate understanding of the process itself etc (Mammadova & Huseynov, 2019).

Another challenge in weak implementation of IQA, according to Mammadova & Huseynov (2019), is the difficulty in conducting evaluation procedures as they usually require a lengthy and often comprehensive processes. Juknyté-Petreikiene *et al.* (2018) found that the nature of the system of governance for HE is complex and there is a need to further develop key areas in order to be in alignment with European practices. Jabbarzade (2020) stated that the integration of Azerbaijan into the EHEA was not successful and did not bring extraordinary changes/benefits to the existing HE system and students were not satisfactorily informed with respect to the implementation of the Bologna principles. Therefore, the AZ experience provides a comparative lens through which European institutions can assess and improve their own IQA systems.

The findings from this study have broader implications for HEIs across Europe that aim to refine their IQA strategies. Identifying the challenges and barriers to successful implementation of IQA in HEIs will further assist in the smooth assimilation of IQA practices and principles. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on QA in HEIs offering key takeaways for European institutions aiming to strengthen their IQA frameworks. Insights from this study highlights areas for improvement and best practices that can be adapted to enhance QA across different HE systems.

The following research objectives will be achieved through this research:

- To explore stakeholders' perceptions of internal quality assurance in higher education institutions using two AZ HEIs
- To identify challenges in implementing effective IQA systems.

Literature Review

The significance of higher education and its connections with technological advancements (Gherhes & Obrad, 2018) and globalisation (Endut, 2014) play a prime role in the economic and societal developments of a country. It enriches the quality of skilled human resources that the country needs (European Commission, 2018) and enhances social and economic development (Dambazau, 2015). To ensure whether HEIs is able to adequately prepare young learners for future jobs, there is a need to measure the quality of the education provided by the HEIs. Education at HEIs can be considered to be of quality if it is able to realize its vision and mission and meet the needs of all its stakeholders in terms of social, professional and industrial needs (Sihotang & Nadeak, 2017).

Concerns over the quality of education in HEIs have encouraged the establishment of external quality assurance (EQA) mechanisms in HEIs across the world which enlists government involvement in the quality control of HEIs' degree programmes and curriculum through periodical assessments by external agencies (Njui, 2018). However, recently, it has become a standard for HEIs to establish their own IQA systems in order to monitor and manage the quality of its own programmes and curriculum. In this paper, the definition of IQA by Jingura & Kamusoko (2019) will be used. They define IQA as those integrated policies and practices utilized by HEIs to oversee, check and control the education programmes and curricula as well as the process of teaching and learning for improvement and progress (Jingura & Kamusoko, 2019).

HEIs worldwide are continuously improving their IQA frameworks to ensure compliance with international standards, particularly those set by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Bologna Process has provided a framework for standardizing higher education across Europe, yet challenges persist in implementing effective IQA systems that align with institutional goals while meeting external accreditation requirements.

Stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in the success of IQA systems, as highlighted in previous studies ((Harvey & Green, 1993; Pham, 2019). Effective IQA implementation requires active participation from students, faculty, administrators, and external partners to foster a culture of continuous improvement (European Commission, 2018). However, resistance to change, inconsistent policy enforcement, and limited resources continue to be barriers to achieving IQA excellence.

The Bologna Process

The main aim of the Bologna Process was to "create a European Higher Education Area by 2010" with a similar or harmonised university degree and course credit system that enable free student mobility among countries in Europe without the necessity of translating credits or qualifications (Zajda and Rust, 2016 in: Jabbarzade, 2020). EHEA is a collaboration of countries in Europe which aim at harmonising higher education systems in order to ensure competitiveness, comparativeness, compatibility and coherence in the HE systems, so as to improve student employability and mobility internationally (Zajda & Rust, 2016). However,

despite providing and overarching framework, the Bologna Process faces challenges in implementation across countries. While some nations could effectively implement and align the degree system and QA practices, some struggle with the same implementation due to various reasons such as institutional resistance, resource constraints and even differing interpretations of the policies (Lodhi & Ilyassova-Schoenfeld, 2023; Veiga, et al., 2008; Mammadova & Valiyev, 2020).

The Council of Europe's vision of a quality education, among others, is that it "enables pupils and students to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens and improve their employability." (Council of Europe, 2024). Graduates who are unprepared to meet the demands of society become a burden to society (Arcaro, 2024). Arcaro (2024) also stated that quality in education is a revolution, as it is time consuming, takes perseverance, a change in attitude by all (stakeholders) and an investment in training programmes for academic staff. For HEIs, quality must be attained in all areas such as teaching, learning, curriculum, facilities, faculty, innovation, community services etc. (Asiyai, 2013).

In order to maintain and improve the quality of education in an HEI, an IQA system needs to be developed with a set of guidelines which govern the implementation process (Arcaro, 2024). Developing a strong IQA systems is vital to support high quality, inclusive education in an HEI (European Commission, 2024). HEIs IQA system should ensure that programme curricula meet the needs of students and industry and also prepare faculty to gain competency in the education delivery and student learning such as engaging students, planning and preparation of study courses, instructional methods, didactical and pedagogical approaches, assessment and evaluation, and evidence-based teaching through practice/research . The most pertinent feature of the IQA in HEIs is the guarantee that students enrolled in study programmes could acquire the competencies and learning outcomes set out in the study programmes (Mushtagov, 2021).

Harvey and Green (1993) noted that quality connotes different understandings and perceptions to different people due to different national and institutional traditions and cultures and many of them are contextually determined. In the scope of this present research, the following characteristics will be explored by the authors given the multi-dimensionality of culture (Endut, 2014) and assurance of comprehensiveness of IQA systems,: the quality of resources (both human and facilities), the quality of the curricula and teaching/learning processes (Frazer, 1994) and the quality of the outcomes, in this case, the students (Schindler *et al.*, 2015).

The Challenges of IQA Implementation in HEIs in AZ

Implementing IQA systems in European HEIs present several challenges as revealed by The Guardian (2025). One significant issue cited by university leaders in England (The Guardian, 2025) is the mounting regulatory burden, which can distract resources from teaching and student support. Additionally, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) stresses that there is lack of genuine engagement from the academic community and this can hinder the development of a quality culture within HEIs (ENQA, 2010). Furthermore, cross-border QA efforts face barriers such as different national requirements, language barriers, use of terminologies etc. and these make implementation of cohesive IQA systems complicated across different countries (EHEA, 2023).

The HE developments in AZ have been enhanced in recent years, by new definitions of the approach such as mission differentiation and the incorporation of vital concepts such as diversity and flexibility and HEIs receiving sufficient autonomy (Mushtagov, 2021). Mushtagov (2021) further elaborates which strategic steps

have been key in the transformational process, such as the extensive collaboration with the EU and the accession to the Bologna Agreement in 2005. He further specifies that internationalization has been also a trigger effect to further enhance the IQA in HEIs, as well as the need for the creating of 'fertile conditions that encourage modern education and innovation' (Mushtagov, 2016, pg.15). As AZ implemented a new education system that was based primarily on European standards, this has created certain challenges (Suleymanov, 2020). Among the challenges are bureaucratic processes, increased workload, perceived ineffectiveness, faculty resistance, resource constraints, quality assurance and alignment with labour market needs (Suleymanov, 2020).

A study by Isaeva *et al.* (2023) assessed the student engagement during their university experience across eight Azerbaijani universities in Baku and other regions and found that in students' opinion, satisfaction with their institutions would have been higher, were they to involve them more in quality interactions, offer a more supportive environment and diverse learning strategies. However, universities must further balance students' input with broader strategic goals, legal and regulatory requirements, resource availability to form effective policies for quality improvement in the educational delivery. Another challenge faced by AZ HEIs is the introduction of technological tools and in recent years, artificial intelligence. A study by Richardson *et al.* (2020) has explored the importance of HEs leveraging technology to engage different stakeholders. Technology can enhance collaboration and communication with stakeholders, provide relevant and timely information about professional development opportunities, and can nurture and embed a 'technology infused learning culture' (Richardson, 2020, p. 963).

Stakeholder Theory and Conceptual Framework

The Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) was utilised in this research as one of the critical aspects of effectively conducting this analysis is identifying and prioritizing the various stakeholder groups that an organization needs to consider. Freeman (1984) defined stakeholders as "any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organisation's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46) or those who have a certain interest group attributes to an entity.

Despite the fact that the Stakeholder theory is gaining increased acceptance and relevance in business organisations, its nuances still need to be explored in the context of HEIs. HEIs play a crucial role in society, for scientific investigation and in imparting knowledge to develop the stronger community (Abdelwahab *et al.*, 2023; Adhikari, & Shrestha, 2023; Bilodeau *et al.*, 2014). Both internal and external stakeholders have the potency to influence HE objectives in areas such as teaching quality, quality of learning resources, curriculum and pedagogical & didactical approaches. Improving relationships with stakeholders is vital (Stocker et al, 2020) as neglecting them may impede the desired success and impact on expected value creation (Kettunen, 2015).

Basing on Freeman's definition of stakeholders (1984), in the context of higher education, internal stakeholders include university management, technical/administrative staff, faculty, and students, while external stakeholders include alumni, employers, ministry of education, community and QA agencies (Mainardes, et al., 2010; Pischedda, et al., 2024). Academic institutions can be regarded as enterprises that run in a dualistic environment. In order to attain success, internal stakeholders' aims must be corresponding with and equivalent to the external stakeholders' aims (Ulewicz, 2017). For an academic institution to function, it is necessary for it to fulfil the needs of the environment and vice versa (Ulewicz, 2017). Thus, stakeholders' feedback is crucial in the IQA processes of HEIs, as it offers insights from both internal and external

perspectives and their involvement in providing feedback in an active manner is indispensable to keep enhancing the curriculum design, the teaching and learning quality, and available resources.

Stakeholders engagement is pertinent for enhancing IQA in HE, as it warrants that varied perspectives are measured, steering to more comprehensive and effective QA processes (Matshoba, 2024). In many countries, the involvement of stakeholders – both internal and external – has become gradually crucial in the development and implementation of IQA systems. Pham (2019) highlights that involving stakeholders in IQA helps align learning outcomes with societal needs, promotes inclusivity, enhances accountability, and fosters a culture of continuous improvement. However, the author also points out that maintaining a common understanding among different stakeholders is challenging, for example due to different perceptions of quality and varied levels of influence (Pham, 2019).

The critical literature review analysis indicated that the implementation of IQA in HEIs is likely to encounter challenges or obstacles due to the dynamic nature of each individual HEI. These challenges can be in the form of limited resources, resistance to change, rigid culture, lack of training of staff and other potential issues (Pham, 2019; Alhamad, 2023; Matshoba & Johannes, 2024). To improve the IQA systems and principles, feedback from both internal and external stakeholders are pertinent, as each of them bring unique perspectives and requirements (Alhamad, 2023; Matshoba & Johannes, 2024). Additionally, specific recommendations and advice from IQA experts can help in finding recommendations to overcome or mitigate these challenges. It is important for the HEIs to ensure a proactive role of IQA experts so as to support the institution's mission for improvement of QA processes.

For the purpose of this research, considering the research focus and due to time/resource constraint, two internal stakeholders (students and faculty/academic staff) and three external stakeholders (alumni, employers & QA experts) have been chosen.

The research framework (Fig. 1) illustrates a feedback-driven IQA system that aims at achieving quality education through continuous improvement. Feedback from both internal and external stakeholders are crucial in order to get their perceptions about the effectiveness of the IQA system. The collected feedback is analysed to identify challenges and provide recommendations for effective IQA implementation and continuous improvement. The QA Cycle directly supports the HEI's mission of delivering quality education, ensuring that improvements align with stakeholders' expectations and institutional goals.

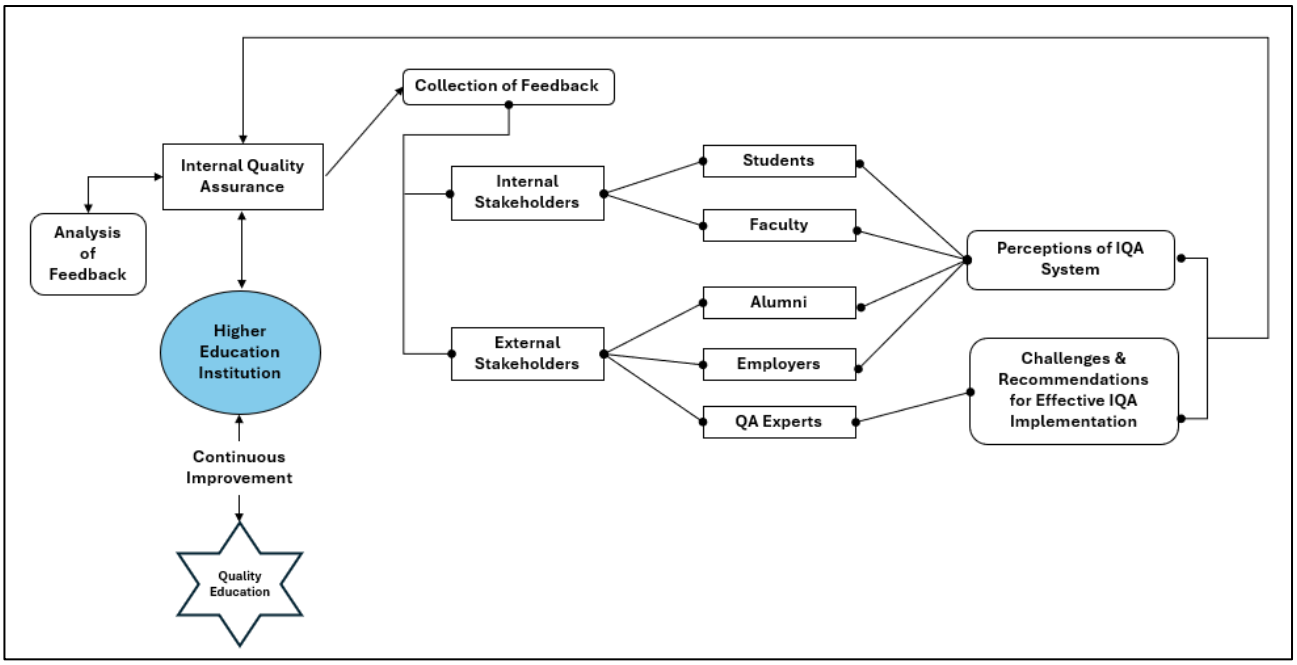

Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework (Developed by Authors)

Methodology

This research adopted the mixed-methods approach as it allows the collection of secondary and primary data. Secondary data involves a critical analysis of relevant journal articles on IQA in HEIs and the findings are presented in the literature review section of this article . Primary data involves the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data (Matović, & Ovesni, 2023). For primary data, an online survey with the stakeholders of selected two HEIs in AZ was conducted and online interviews were conducted with five IQA Experts.

Profiles of two HEIs in AZ

The profiles of the two HEIs in this study are provided by the respective HEIs who are part of the IQAinAR Project and from the websites of the respective HEIs. It is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Profiles of HE1 and HE2

Comparison Items	HE1	HE2
Date of establishment and Location	1921, in Baku, Azerbaijan	1967 in Nakhchivan City, Azerbaijan
Physical size & facilities	Has four educational buildings in Baku and five regional branches. It is the only	108-hectare campus which features state-of-the-art teaching buildings, electronic classrooms, laboratories, internet centers, and an electronic

	AZ university with such an extensive network	library. A campus-wide Wi-Fi system ensures connectivity for all students and staff.
Number of students	18,000, both local and international students	35,000, both local and international students
Number of faculties	8	10
Number of faculty members	700	703
Programmes	bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes across various disciplines	bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes across multiple disciplines, as well as residency programmes
IQA System	QA Department is tasked with implementing a ranking evaluation system to improve education quality. The university has developed statutes outlining the functions and responsibilities of its QA Department, emphasizing collaboration with local and international partners.	QA Sector is responsible for implementing education quality policies, ensuring the integration of scientific research with education, and involving students in QA processes. It conducts regular monitoring and evaluation of its QA systems, ensuring alignment with the ESG.

Source: Authors

Collection of Quantitative Data

The sample of students and alumni were chosen using non-probability, purposive sampling method. Further, to ensure a representative number of participants, a combination of heterogeneous sampling and volunteer sampling was chosen (i.e. participants volunteer). The survey was publicised in each of the HEIs via the standard channels (emails, learning portals or announcement boards), until the required total was obtained, i.e. 40 each for student and alumni group. As for the faculty and employers groups, purposive sampling was used and the participants were contacted and invited via email to participate in the survey. The number of faculty and employer who participated was 25 each.

The research instrument used for the survey was developed based on existing studies and discussions among the members of the IQAinAR Consortium[1] of the IQAinAR Erasmus+ Project, which consists of faculty, quality assurance staff, researchers and administrative staff. An MS online form was created to collect feedback from students, alumni, faculty and employers. The questions were developed based on the IQA indicators and these were developed by the same consortium. The questionnaire was further reviewed by two experienced faculty and researchers from the authors' HEI. Slight modifications were

[1] Erasmus+ IQAinAR Project aims to support enhancement and development of the IQA of HEIs of partner countries with international (EU) quality standards as benchmarks as well as strengthening the HEIs towards local, regional and national policies and strategies implementation. The partner countries that make up the Consortium are Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands) (Project Coordinator), 456 International B.V. (the Netherlands), Fundacion Universitaria San Antonio (UCAM – Spain), Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU – Azerbaijan), Nakhchivan State University (NSU – Azerbaijan), Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTU – Azerbaijan), The Education Quality Assurance Agency of Azerbaijan (TKTA – Azerbaijan).

made to the questionnaire based on feedback from the researchers. The questionnaire included 5-point Likert scale questions, ranking and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire consists of 2 sections. More details about the questionnaire can be found in Table 2 below.

- Demographic background
- IQA-related questions

Table 2: Indicators & Questions

IQA Indicator of Perceived (No. of Questions in brackets)			
Students	**Alumni**	**Faculty**	**Employers**
Impact of HEI on graduate knowledge & skills (3)	Satisfaction with internship programme (8)	Institutional commitment to quality of education, teaching, learning & assessments (9)	Importance of HE Diploma in hiring (5)
Teaching & learning quality and learning experience (4)	Satisfaction with the level of professional training received (1)	Leadership Commitment (2)	Importance of level of HE in hiring (1)
Institutional leadership commitment towards quality (5)	Impact on the formation of professional and general theoretical training (1)	Research focus of academic staff (1)	Importance of candidate's experience in hiring (4)
Academic staff commitment towards quality of teaching (2)	Impact on the formation of level of practical knowledge, skills of professional activity of a specialist (1)	Quality of Education at HEI (4)	Difficulties faced in selecting employees (4)
Academic staff professional competence and research background (2)	Theoretical training generally meets modern requirements (1)	University's reputation (2)	
Level of cognitive stimulation in course delivery (2)		Involvement in IQA (5)	
Quality of learning activities and experience (1)			
Quality of learning process (1)			
Quality of assessments (2)			
Quality of assessment methods (2)			
Effective feedback mechanisms (2)			
Quality of education at HEI (1)			
University's reputation (1)			
Involvement in IQA (1)			

To assess the reliability of the instrument, pilot testing was done by the authors on its own HEI's stakeholders. Based on extant literature, 10% of each of the sample group is sufficient for pilot testing. The pilot survey was conducted on 5 students, 5 alumni, 3 faculty and 3 employers. After the pilot survey was

done, the reliability test was carried out using Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach's alpha for all questions was more than 0.7, indicating that the construct validity and internal consistency of the questionnaire was satisfactory (Taber, 2017; Cronbach, 1951). Furthermore, minor amendments were made based on feedback from the pilot group.

Collection of Qualitative Data

For the collection of qualitative data, online one-on-one interviews via MS Teams were conducted with five QA experts between March and May 2024. The five QA exerts were selected based on non-probability, purposive sampling method. Subjective judgements were used and it focused on particular characteristics of the population in question (Fife & Gossner, 2024). The criteria for choosing the five experts were: have more than five years' experience working in HEIs, have been actively involved in IQA or EQA in HEIs and have been involved in accreditation of HEIs.

The demographic profile of each of the experts is given in Table 3. Their names were omitted for anonymity purposes, although they have agreed for their profiles to be shared in this research. The interview sessions were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were based on semi-structured, open-ended questions (Weller, et al., 2018). Based on analysis of literature from previous studies, key conclusions and themes were derived and interview questions were developed. The aim of the questions was to elicit rich, but specific insights into challenges and recommendations for effective implementation of IQA systems in HEIs. The questions were pilot-tested on one faculty/researcher at Wittenborg and slight modifications were made based on the feedback from the faculty/researcher.

Table 3: Profile of QA Experts

Participant Code	Position	Country of Origin	Duration of Interview
E1	• a professor in HE, an active researcher • has published more than 40 journal articles • active contributor to various international accreditation organisations such as AACSB, EFMD.	The Netherlands	47 min 32 sec
E2	• a professor at a top university in the Netherlands • a panel chair for FIBAA and NVAO • has chaired review panels for accrediting programmes	The Netherlands	27 min 34 sec
E3	• an ex-president of a top university in the United States • held a top position in AACSB • has a long history in academic leadership and business education • has been involved in many accreditation and quality enhancement activities in HE	United States of America	34 min 4 sec
E4	• an ex-board member of NVAO • has a history in HE QA • has contributed to policy development at national level in the Netherlands	The Netherlands	24 min 37 sec

E5	• a senior expert in quality and accreditations at a university in Budapest • specializes in maintaining high academic standards and managing QA processes in HEIs	Hungary	57 min 29 sec

Source: Authors

Data Analysis

The MS EXCEL was used to calculate and analyse the quantitative results using Mean and Standard Deviation. The two selected HEIs were given the codes HE1 and HE2 for anonymity purposes. The Cronbach's Alpha (see Table 3) for all items for students, alumni, faculty and employer's survey are all above 0.7, which indicate a very strong construct validity and internal consistency levels of the questionnaires and that they are suitable for the aims set in the research objectives (Taber, 2017).

Table 4: Cronbach's Alpha

Stakeholders	**Students**	**Alumni**	**Faculty**	**Employers**
Cronbach's α	.95	.70	.88	.75

Source: Authors

Analysis of Perception and IQA Indicators

In analysing the survey results, the mean and standard deviations are computed. The use of mean and standard deviation to analyse Likert-type items has been the subject of controversy for many researchers (Boone & Boone, 2012; Alkharusi, 2022). Clason and Dormody (1994) differentiated between Likert-type items and Likert Scales. Likert-type items are single questions in which the researchers have no intention to combine the responses into a composite scale (Clason & Dormody, 1994). In contrast, Likert scale is made of a series of four or more Likert-type items and are merged into a single composite score during analysis. Combined, the items are used to provide a quantitative measure of a character. As shown in Table 3 above, majority of the indicators are made of a series of four or more Likert-type items. The authors are only interested in the composite score that represents the perceptions of the stakeholders in the different IQA indicators. Alkharusi (2022) stated that Likert scales and Likert-type items with five categories can be analysed using the means and standard deviations (Alkharusi, 2022).

In analysing the means of the IQA indicators, the following intervals and indications shown in Table 5 will be referred to (Pimentel, 2010). The standard deviation measures, on average, how far each response lies from the mean or how dispersed the data is on a bell curve when compared to the mean. A low standard deviation shows that the responses are tightly clustered around the mean while a high standard deviation shows that the responses are more spread out.

Table 5: 5-point Likert Scale Interval

No.	**Option**	**Mean Interval**	**Indication**
1	Strongly Disagree (1)	1 – 1.80	Very negative perception

2	Disagree (2)	1.81 – 2.60	Negative perception
3	Neutral (3)	2.61 – 3.40	Neither negative nor positive perception
4	Agree (4)	3.41 – 4.20	Positive perception
5	Strongly Agree (5)	4.21 – 5.00	Very positive perception

Source: Pimentel, 2010

In analysing the qualitative data (responses from IQA experts), a few steps were carried out. Firstly, a set of codes was developed. This entailed coding and categorising the interviewees' responses to the interview questions based on open coding categories, grouping codes with similar content together (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Then, the grouped concepts were further grouped and categorised using selective coding categories. This is important to identify emerging themes, which represent the group's overall perceptions and experiences. The final step was an extensive review and narrative interpretation of the data in order to draw conclusions. From the consistent comparison of elements and categories, several overarching themes were noted. These themes are used to present the study's conclusions in relation to the research objectives. The next section presents results and findings based on this analysis.

Results and Findings

The results section is divided into two parts. The first part presents quantitative analysis of the data collected from the online survey on the perceptions of stakeholders on the current IQA systems in AZ HEIs. The second part analyses the responses from the interview with IQA experts.

Perceptions of Stakeholders on the current IQA systems in HEIs in Azerbaijan

Students

Based on an analysis of the mean and standard deviations of the responses from both HE1 & HE2, the following can be concluded. Generally, both HEIs received similar ratings across most IQA indicators, with a tendency towards "Agree" in their responses (Table 6 and Fig. 2). Overall, HE1 received slightly higher ratings than HE2 in eight indicators out of 14 indicators (highlighted in yellow). Both institutions portrayed high SD across almost indicators, indicating diverse perceptions throughout the whole spectrum from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Both institutions show a neutral perception of the level of cognitive stimulation in course delivery, indicating an area to be looked into.

Table 6: Perceptions of Students

IQA Indicators: Students	**HE1**			**HE2**		
	Mean	**SD**	**Indication**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Indication**
Impact of HEI on graduate knowledge & skills	3.29	0.82	Neutral	3.68	1.01	Agree
Teaching & learning quality /learning experience	3.61	1.00	Agree	3.70	0.93	Agree
Institutional leadership commitment towards quality/student learning	3.32	0.98	Neutral	3.54	0.95	Agree
Academic staff commitment towards quality of teaching	3.66	1.03	Agree	3.57	0.93	Agree

Academic staff professional competence/ research background	4.16	0.72	Agree	3.71	0.93	Agree
Level of cognitive stimulation in course delivery	3.01	1.09	Neutral	3.34	0.94	Neutral
Quality of learning activities/experience	3.58	1.08	Agree	3.49	1.00	Agree
Quality of learning process	3.43	1.08	Agree	3.79	0.89	Agree
Quality of assessments/practices	2.86	1.06	Neutral	3.48	0.97	Agree
Quality of assessment methods	3.71	0.93	Agree	3.57	0.83	Agree
Effective feedback mechanisms	3.71	0.93	Agree	3.64	0.96	Agree
Quality of education at the HEI	3.58	0.96	Agree	3.57	0.87	Agree
University's reputation	3.58	1.11	Agree	3.56	0.97	Agree
Involvement in QA	3.73	0.99	Agree	3.47	0.91	Agree

Source: Authors

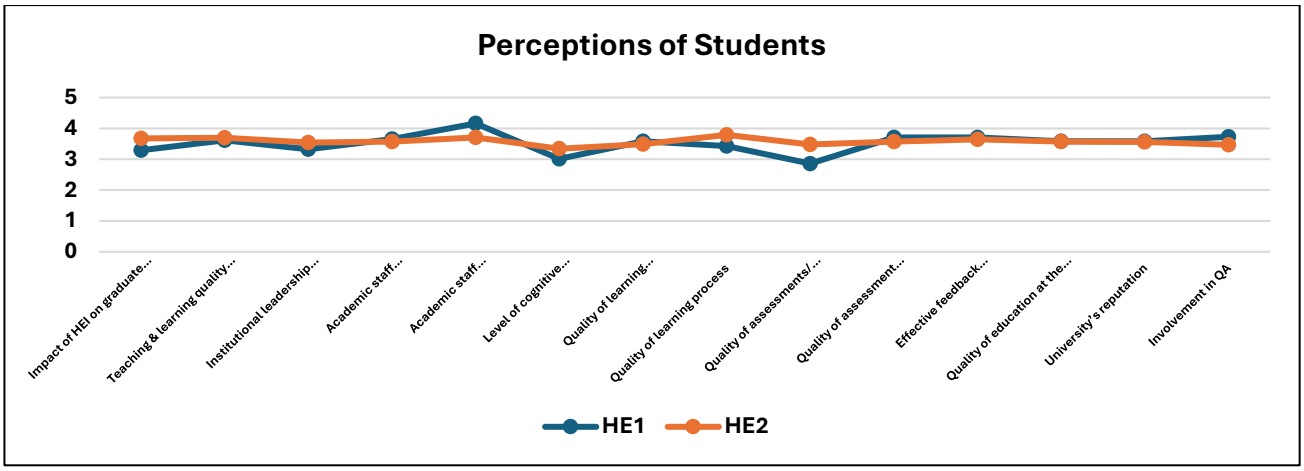

Fig. 2: Perceptions of Students (Source: Authors)

In responding to the ranking question "What does good education mean to you?" (Dicker et al., 2018), the top 5 statements chosen by students are shown in Table 7 below. In general, both HE1 and HE2 students value interactive learning environments, access to robust technological and research resources, while also highlighting a unique difference in the valuation of peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.

Table 7: Responses to what good education means.

Question: What does good education mean to you?	
HE1	**HE2**
The top 5 statements chosen by students are: 1. Good classroom activities 2. Teacher availability for questions and feedback 3. Information Technology (IT) facilities	The top 5 statements chosen by students are: 1. Good classroom activities 2. Information Technology (IT) facilities 3. Good research facilities

4. Good research facilities 5. Access to information (online and offline)	4. Availability of lecturers for questions and feedback 1. 5.The time I have with fellow students to exchange knowledge and

Source: Authors

Alumni

Based on the analysis, there is a stark difference between the perception of the alumni in both HEIs (see Table 8 and Fig. 3). Generally, HE1 is perceived more positively by its alumni in all aspects of the IQA indicators as compared to HE2. However, for HE2, although the means show agreement, it is from the lower threshold (See Table 4 above), and often, the SD is high, depicting diverse opinions from alumni.

Table 8: Perceptions of Alumni

IQA Indicators: Alumni	**HE1**			**HE2**		
	Mean	**SD**	**Indication**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Indication**
Quality of Internship Programme	4.65	0.38	Strongly Agree	3.81	0.81	Agree
Quality of Professional Training	4.50	0.50	Strongly Agree	3.83	0.75	Agree
Quality of Formation of Professional General Theoretical Training	4.65	0.48	Strongly Agree	3.93	0.47	Agree
Quality of Formation of Level of Practical Knowledge and Skills of Professional Activity of a Specialist	4.44	0.50	Strongly Agree	3.75	0.75	Agree
Quality of Theoretical Training in terms of Modern Requirements	4.18	0.71	Agree	3.75	0.47	Agree

Source: Authors

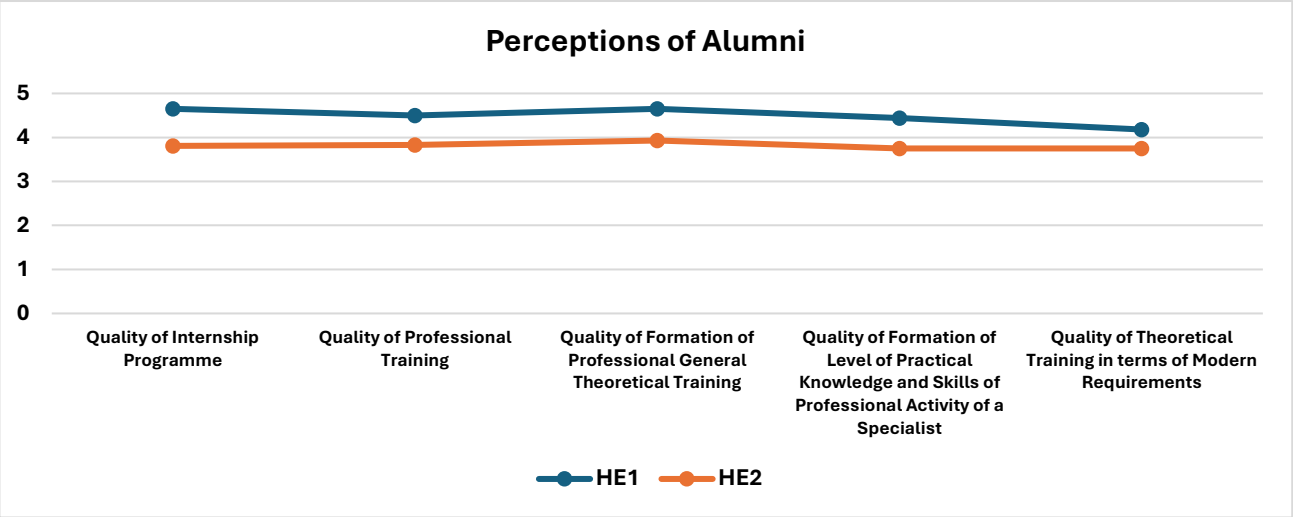

Fig. 3: Perception of Alumni (Source: Authors)

To the open-ended question "Could you share your recommendations on how to improve the level of theoretical and practical education of students at your university?", the top three recommendations mentioned by the alumni in HE1 and HE2 are shown in Table 9 below. Generally, HE1 alumni feel that to enhance both theoretical and practical education, the university needs to improve its infrastructure, practical training and collaboration with employers and other universities. On the other hand, HE2 alumni feel that to improve educational outcomes, the university should adopt modern teaching methods, incorporate engaging topics and foster peer collaboration.

Table 9: Recommendations on how to improve the level of theoretical and practical education

Question: Could you share your recommendations on how to improve the level of theoretical and practical education of students at your university?	
HE1	**HE2**
• Closer ties with employers • Increase in the share of practical training on the basis of organisations and enterprises • Modernisation of qualification tests (form of exams, tests, case assignments)	• Should pick more interesting topics, use many examples in order to be more comprehensive and clear • To increase the existing level of knowledge of students using modern technology • Sharing and helping among students

Source: Authors

Faculty

Analysis of the faculty responses of both HEIs (see Table 10 and Fig. 4) presents a higher mean scores across all IQA indicators for HE2, suggesting stronger positive perceptions compared to HE1. However, HE2 often shows higher standard deviations which means that while many faculty are very satisfied with the IQA, there are also more divergent views within HE2. This analysis is important for HE1 and HE2 to improve on its areas of weaknesses in order to enhance overall faculty satisfaction.

Table 10: Perceptions of Faculty

IQA Indicators: Faculty	HE1			HE2		
	Mean	SD	Indication	Mean	SD	Indication
Quality of Education	4.02	0.63	Agree	4.21	0.70	Strongly Agree
Institutional Commitment to Quality of Education, Teaching, Learning & Assessments	3.47	0.78	Agree	4.08	0.77	Agree
Involvement of Academic Staff in the IQA/Quality Management	3.72	0.54	Agree	4.03	0.87	Agree
Leadership Commitment	3.90	0.65	Agree	3.97	0.68	Agree
University's Reputation	3.90	0.55	Agree	4.17	0.88	Agree
Research Focus of Academic Staff	4.27	0.80	Strongly Agree	4.33	1.05	Strongly Agree

Source: Authors

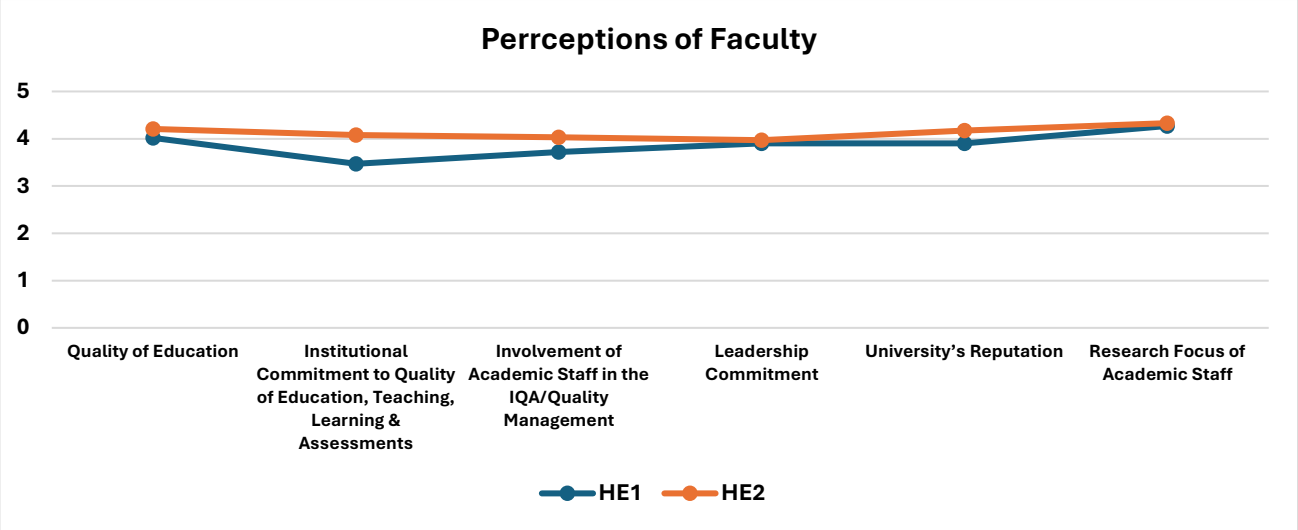

Fig. 4: Perception of Faculty (Source: Authors)

Employers

Referring to Table 11 and Fig. 5 below, employers from HE1 have a higher regard for the quality of education and the relevant competencies (higher means) as compared to those from HE2. The employers from HE1 cite the importance of graduates having both hard skills and soft skills when hiring (higher means). It is interesting to note that the employers from both institutions do not consider the importance of the level of higher education in hiring as demonstrated by the low means and standard deviations.

Table 11: Perceptions of Employers

IQA Indicators: Employers	HE1			HE2		
	Mean	SD	Indication	Mean	SD	Indication
Importance of higher education diploma in hiring	3.70	1.09	Agree	3.33	1.07	Neutral
Importance of the level of higher education in hiring	1.67	0.72	Strongly Disagree	1.56	0.81	Strongly Disagree
Importance of the candidate's experience in hiring.	3.72	0.82	Agree	3.73	0.98	Agree
Difficulties in selecting new employees with the required educational level	4.25	0.84	Strongly Agree	3.41	0.93	Agree
Importance of professional competencies of an employee when hiring (**hard skills** - theoretical, practical, written and oral communication knowledge and skills)	4.38	0.60	Strongly Agree	3.81	1.03	Agree
Importance of professional competencies of an employee when hiring (**soft skills** - teamwork, professional development, intercultural skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills)	4.28	0.51	Strongly Agree	3.86	0.75	Agree

Source: Authors

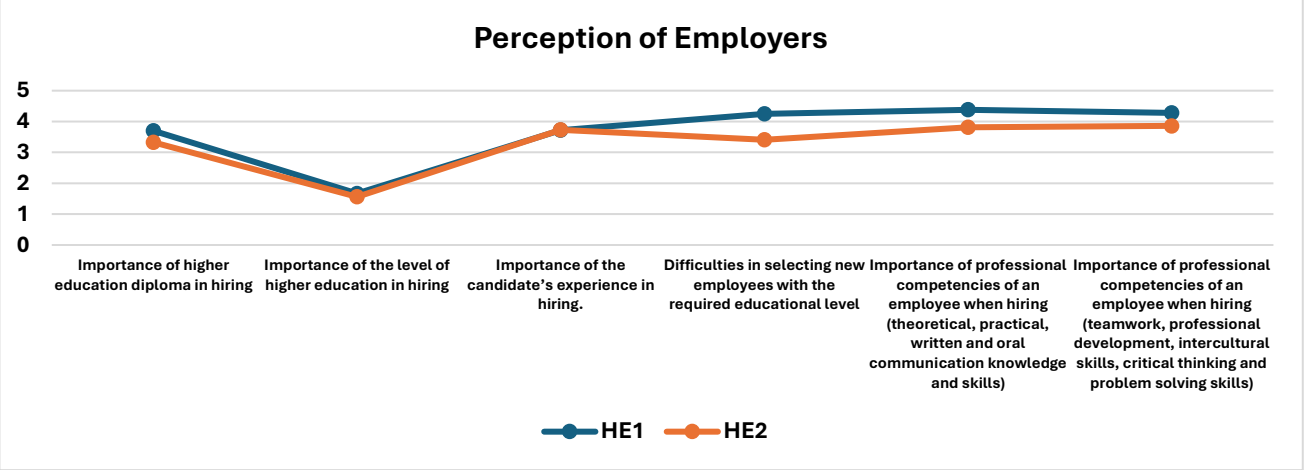

Fig. 5: Perception of Employers (Source: Authors)

Challenges in implementing IQA – Experts Analysis

Based on an analysis of the interview transcripts, significant challenges in implementing IQA in higher education is the lack of a pervasive quality culture, faculty resistance and lack of stakeholder engagements as shown in the word cloud below.

Figure 6:Word Cloud on Challenges in IQA Implementation

Many institutions struggle with getting everyone on board, leading to insufficient support, acceptance, and commitment. This is often compounded by a lack of knowledge and understanding about IQA processes. Poor communication, trust, transparency, and independence further exacerbate these issues, as highlighted by E2:

> The strategy and the commitment to IQA needs to be effectively communicated across the institution. There must be ample time for discussion, dialogue, conversation about the value of IQA and its impact on the organization and about the expectations of colleagues.

The interview responses highlighted the lack of commitment, support, and interest in fostering a quality culture, particularly in Eastern European countries where education takes a backseat to strict guidelines for promotion. West-European countries, on the other hand, face the “publish or perish” mentality, which can hinder quality efforts. Resistance to change, stemming from time constraints and added responsibilities, is also a significant challenge, as evidenced by the following response from E3:

> I am already too occupied. I am too busy. I am teaching classes. I am engaged in research. In many cases, I am envisioning counselling with students. I just don't have time and so part of the management of the IQA journey is to collaborate in this case with teachers, with professors, to assure them that their contributions are pertinent.

Effective leadership and management of the IQA process are critical yet often hindered by resource constraints and the overwhelming amount of data and measurements required. Institutions frequently lack a structured approach in engaging stakeholders, resulting in poor response rates. E5 opined:

> People get a lot of requests, so I think there is a general fatigue in the age of constant online presence, about all the IQA surveys and all the emails, and so that can be really quite challenging. So actually sometimes mixing the different stakeholders groups can

> work as well, and I also I think, I would like to emphasize if you make sure that they understand that their contribution is valuable, that it can have an impact for the future.

Another prevalent challenge is the absence of opportunities to benchmark performance against other institutions. This lack of benchmarking makes it difficult for higher education institutions to gauge their progress and identify areas for improvement. E3 pointed out:

> Benchmarking is what peer institutions have done previously of learning from colleagues at other institutions, both in country and in the region across countries and in some cases around the world. So that you can avoid common errors, learn from the good work of others, and enhance upon that work as well.

This highlights the need for more robust but a simple approach of benchmarking mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness of IQA.

The leadership and management of quality processes are often criticized for being overly bureaucratic, as illustrated by E4: ‘If IQA is associated with lots of bureaucracy, then you are at risk. So this is quite a general example and the lesson I learned is to make the system as less bureaucratic as possible’. Excessive bureaucracy can impede the effective implementation and continuous improvement of quality initiatives, hindering progress and innovation.

With regards to the topic on the recent significant advancements in AI technologies and its impact on IQA systems, E1 says that AI tools can revolutionize teaching and learning by providing "*proofreading and editing for non-native students*" and assistance in various other learning aspects. In assessments, AI can aid in setting more creative assignments and efficient marking, offering swift and detailed feedback to students. For learning, AI can support students in writing, editing papers, and providing tutorial guidance, coaching, and counselling. AI can play a crucial role in monitoring learning outcomes and evaluating academic programs as E1 explained:

> If you have defined certain learning objectives then you can use AI to see whether those learning objectives have been properly formulated in all the modules in a particular program, for example. AI will play a role in a program development both from a content point of view, from an assessment point of view and from an IQA point of view.

This can help institutions make data-driven decisions to enhance the quality of education and align with industry demands. As AI becomes more prevalent in education, it is essential for faculty to receive proper training on to effectively leverage these tools in their teaching practices and assessments. E1 suggested:

> Faculty members probably have to go back to school and learn about what AI can mean for them in their particular education, because 95% of the faculty members teaching today have never had that as part of their education. Have to take a few courses in that area.

Continuous professional development will be necessary to keep pace with the rapid advancements in AI technologies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings demonstrate different aspects of IQA that need to be worked on by both HEI and HE2. Students' perceptions in both HEIs indicate a positive level of satisfaction based on several IQA indicators such as teaching and learning quality, academic staff commitment, and the quality of learning activities. However, there are some neutral responses in HE1, which suggests that there may be gaps in leadership engagement, assessment and cognitive challenge in the curricula or course delivery. HE2 received slightly higher ratings than HEI in most indicators, suggesting that HE2 has more robust policies of IQA that enhance student experience.

For alumni, the focus is on professional preparedness and training quality, as these directly relate to the effectiveness of IQA in ensuring employability. Based on the findings, HE1 has a stronger perceived impact in preparing students for the workforce, indicating that HE1 may have a more effective IQA system in bridging the gap between academic learning and professional skills.

A deeper analysis in the form of additional surveys on topics such as better interactive learning environments, robust technological and research resources, practical training with employers and need to made. The high standard deviations in many of the areas are also a concern as they indicate wide variations of perceptions from students, alumni and faculty. These gaps need to be closed. The feedback from employers underscores the significance of practical skills and experience over higher education qualifications.

The literature emphasizes the significance of stakeholder engagement in IQA systems (Harvey & Green, 1993; Pham, 2019). The student perception data is in alignment with this as students from both HEIs report positive perceptions on faculty commitment and learning experiences but are not so convinced about leadership commitment and assessment quality. This could suggest that while faculty engagement is encouraging, institutional leadership may not be effectively communicating IQA practices, which supports ENQA's (2010) findings that lack of academic community engagement hinders the development of IQA in HEIs.

The alumni data from HE1 also strongly supports the notion that HE plays a crucial role in workforce readiness and economic development as highlighted by Council of Europe (2024) and European Commission (2018). This also supports Mushtagov (2021) that HEIs with a stronger IQA system focusing on internships and professional trainings produce more employable graduates.

Feedback from IQA experts highlighted significant challenges in implementing IQA, such as the absence of a pervasive quality culture, inadequate communication, trust and transparency issues, and resource constraints. This is in line with literature as cited in Lodhi & Ilyassova-Schoenfeld (2023), Veiga et al. (2008) and Mammadova & Valiyev (2020). The neutral ratings by students in areas suggest possible resistance or gaps in institutional leadership, cognitive stimulation, and assessments and these could hinder full adoption of IQA standards. This supports findings by Arcaro (2024) that to in order to achieve quality education, cultural shifts, perseverance, and investment in faculty training are needed.

In addition, while advancements in Artificial Intelligence technologies present promising opportunities for enhancing IQA, it is imperative to ensure timely and comprehensive faculty training on the effective use of these AI tools.

In conclusion, this research has provided valuable insights into stakeholders' perceptions of educational quality in two prominent Azerbaijani higher education institutions, shedding light on both strengths and areas for improvement in the IQA processes. The study has also successfully identified several key challenges and barriers that impede the effective implementation of IQA systems within these institutions, similar to those specified by Suleymanov (2020).

These findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge on QA in HE and offer practical implications for policymakers and institutional leaders across Europe. By addressing identified challenges and leveraging stakeholder perspectives, HEIs can enhance their IQA mechanisms and foster a sustainable culture of continuous improvement.

The results of this study can be applied to improve educational quality in other HEIs by serving as a benchmark for identifying common challenges and developing best practices in IQA implementation. Furthermore, the insights gained from stakeholder perceptions can guide policy-makers especially TKTA and institutional leaders in crafting more effective and responsive QA frameworks that address the specific needs of their educational contexts. Future research should focus on the impact of AI on IQA and HE, exploring how emerging technologies can be leveraged to enhance QA processes and improve overall educational outcomes.

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