

Evaluation and Quality Assurance for Higher Education in Morocco: the ANEAQ as the Main Actor

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Abstract: The Moroccan higher education has undergone several attempts of reform. the latest being the adoption of a framework law based on the 2015-2030 strategic vision of the Higher Education Council in which evaluation is placed at the center of the reform. Thus, competition and competitiveness in the field of higher education at the national and international levels have prompted Moroccan universities to integrate evaluation into their continuous improvement process through strategic projects, cooperative or even voluntary initiatives, either partially or for the whole university, covering all domains or focusing on specific ones. The National Agency for Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education and Scientific Research (ANEAQ) is an autonomous instance in charge of evaluating the higher education system to guarantee its quality. Its field of action covers all national institutions and training programs. Despite this enormous scope of action and the difficulties encountered, it has been able to promote a quality culture and harmonize the practice of institutional evaluation through the implementation of the national reference system covering all the institution's activities. This article highlights the importance of evaluation and quality assurance in the Moroccan higher education sector, explores the scope of action and the role played by ANEAQ, and provides some ways for improving the evaluation process.

Keywords: Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Evaluation, ANEAQ

Introduction

The diversification of higher education systems and the entry of new providers into the field of training have made it necessary to set up mechanisms for evaluation and quality assurance.

The principle of continuous evaluation has always been at the heart of the reforms, notably articles 77, 78 and 79 of Law 01.00 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2000), the strategic vision of the reform (2015-2030) and the framework law n° 51.17 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019) relating to the system of education, teaching, training and scientific research.

Moroccan universities have had rich experiences in terms of internal (self-evaluation) and external evaluation, either voluntarily or within the framework of projects (strategic or cooperative). These evaluations are mostly global, covering all domains of the institution, and sometimes partial covering a specific domain but irregularly (Wahabi et al., 2018). Thus, the Parliament adopted the law 80-12 (ANEAQ, 2014) relating to the creation of ANEAQ, with the aim of entrenching the principles of governance and accountability and implementing the requirements of section 79 of Law 01.00 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2000) while institutionalizing the practice of evaluation and quality assurance.

As indicated by its name, the objective of creating ANEAQ is to improve and ensure the quality, competitiveness and diversity of training, to promote scientific research and adapt training to the requirements of the work market in order to create a suitable environment for developing the Moroccan higher education system and scientific research.

The overall structure of the paper takes the form of six main chapters including this introductory chapter. The second chapter defines the main concepts, highlights the importance of evaluation and QA, presents the national reference system used in evaluation, gives a brief overview of ANEAQ's scope of action and illustrates the situation of QA in Moroccan universities. The main results of the agency's evaluation in the last five years and its discussion are presented in the third and fourth chapter respectively. The fifth chapter gives a brief summary of the main points discussed in this paper. The final chapter identifies some recommendations for improvement in the evaluation and QA process.

Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Definition of Concepts and General Overview

Quality assurance is a set of processes and mechanisms for evaluating the degree of achievement of objectives and agreeing on methods for continuous improvement of the institution's activities. Evaluation, on the other hand, is the systematic audit process aimed at measuring the institution's ability to meet specific requirements and achieve the objectives, by comparing the level of performance with the criteria or expectations of the

institution. It aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the institution which in return is required to respond to them given the public nature of the reports (ANEAQ, 2019).

Quality and evaluation are inseparable. On the one hand, evaluation allows the institution to get feedback on quality improvement actions, and on the other hand, the quality approach helps the institution to make what it does intelligible, to make a clear diagnosis and analysis of itself and to identify areas for improvement. Quality assurance and evaluation are main pillars of the reform of the higher education system to improve its performance and attractiveness.

The principle of continuous evaluation has been clearly mentioned in articles 77, 78 and 79 of Law 01.00 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2000) in addition to this, the strategic vision of the reform (2015-2030), redefining the objectives for the higher education sector, has identified in its methodological foundations: "The development of vigilant monitoring and systematic internal and external evaluation of the reform implementation process and its achievements, in order to design, in time, the necessary corrections and the continuous improvement of its results" (Higher Council of Education, Training and Scientific Research, 2015). The need for systematic and regular evaluation was also confirmed by Framework Law No. 51.17, in particular Article 4: "... The adoption of a methodology for the periodic and regular evaluation of the system in all its components and levels, in order to measure its cost-effectiveness, the achievement and attainment of the objectives set ..." (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019).

Evaluation and quality assurance play a key role in addressing the dramatic mismatch between the profile of graduates and the demand of the labor market. This mismatch is observed each year when the most selective higher education institutes provide the labor market with thousands of fresh graduates with high skill profiles, who, at the same time, cannot satisfy the needs of the market demand. This explains the high rates of highly educated unemployment which lead thousands of students to drop out before receiving a degree. While others choose to leave Morocco looking for better opportunities, usually in prestigious schools of France.

The higher education system has shifted from a *teacher-centered perspective and pedagogical input to a student-centered practice and teaching outcomes*, where a system of Student-Teacher Evaluation (STE) has been widely implemented. This approach makes teachers more aware of what they are teaching (e.g. classroom instruction, individual coaching, assistance with assignments) and the impact of their actions on student learning (Centra, 1993). It also supports the improvement of the quality of teaching by using the information provided by students through inquiries driven by the instructors themselves, that focuses more on awareness of their impact on student learning than on accountability to their administrative structure. Moreover, the STE process must be accompanied with the development of evaluation mechanisms for the *recognition and reward of teachers' merit*. It is an essential lever for enhancing the quality of teaching and scientific production (Kaaouachi, 2010).

Furthermore, the practice of evaluation and QA in education is one of the fundamentals for the development of any country as mentioned in UNESCO's report about education in Morocco "...the issue of quality is as

important today as much as all the new challenges and problems relevant to education. The young persons should nowadays be prepared to face those new challenges; they should be armed with new knowledge, techniques, skills and behaviors. The education values should be strengthened through a quality education that provides all students with an equitable access regardless from their geographical area of residence. The importance of the quality of education for the development is obvious given the level of priority that was granted to it in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The goals of the EFA defined during the international forum in Dakar in April 2000, brought up the issue of the quality of education and committed countries to improve all aspects of learning. This is why the quality of education is a must that goes beyond its importance or usefulness for development...” (UNESCO, 2014).

Besides, universities need to clarify their intentions and preferred approach and make evaluation part of their policy agenda. On a more operational level, a formal distinction must be made between formative evaluations and administrative procedures. The place of evaluation in institutional management should be explained by specifying the norms and values, and even the criteria used, as well as the roles of the various parties, and by designating the competent bodies. Finally, it is necessary to indicate the accompanying measures and the rights of appeal in relation to the evaluation (Nicole Rege Colet, 2008).

The practice of evaluation in the field of education in Morocco, as an essential step in any pedagogical renovation process, encompasses different organisms and institutions. Therefore, it should be noted here that the National Evaluation Instance (INE), created in 2007 within the Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research, has as its main mission the overall evaluation of public policies in the area of training and education, while ANEAQ is particularly responsible of *evaluating the higher education sector* through its missions as indicated in its creation law No. 80-12, namely (ANEAQ, 2014) :

1. The evaluation of public and private higher education institutions;
2. The evaluation of training programs;
3. The evaluation of scientific research and the effectiveness of its structures;
4. The evaluation of university cooperation programs and projects.

Reference System of Evaluation and Quality Assurance

ANEAQ bases its *evaluation of training programs* on the *National Pedagogical Standards (CNPNS)* of 2014 as a reference (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014) and on the regulatory texts of private higher education. The goal of this evaluation is to obtain accreditation which is pronounced by the higher education department after the decision of the National Commission for the Coordination of Higher Education (CNaCES). This decision is based on the evaluation and expertise carried out by the Agency. This regulatory framework, CNPNS, defines the rules for the design and structure of programs at all cycles and levels. These standards are specific to each level and each type of degree. The CNPN consists of three main parts: stream standards (FL), module standards (MD) and standards for the regime of studies and evaluations (RG).

Concerning *the institutional evaluation*, and as an application of ANEAQ's Article 5 of Law No. 80-12, the Government Council adopted the National Quality Evaluation and Assurance Reference Framework setting the criteria for institutional evaluation of higher education institutions, published in the BO 05 August 2019. In the spirit of capitalizing on the results of previous projects of this type, the design and development of these quality criteria were based on various sources, including: The RECET (Renforcement des compétences en Évaluation Institutionnelle) project, The AQi-UMed project (*AQUIMED*, 2013), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area: European Standards and Guidelines (European Students' Union (ESU) (Belgium) et al., 2015). These criteria were the result of work carried out within the framework of the Technical Assistance project subsidized by the European Union (Program Succeed Advanced Status "RSA II"), They are also the result of active participation in the form of seminars and meetings in situ with representatives of all stakeholders: several departments of the Ministry of Higher Education and other national bodies, universities, public and private institutions and experts.

This reference system is designed in form and substance in order to be adopted in the internal and external evaluation of Moroccan public and private higher education institutions, is intended to be practical, and would enable these institutions to evaluate the extent to which this reference system interacts with the different national and international references of quality assurance in higher education namely:

- Self-understanding of the institution and its positioning at regional, national and international levels;
- Decision making through the institutional bodies and strategic management performance;
- Interest in implementing Quality Assurance process and the extent to which the implementation of its results contributes to decision making and strategic planning;
- Looking for continuous improvement for effective internal and external performance of the institution.

The Quality Assurance and Evaluation Reference System for Higher Education in Morocco, developed and recently published, outlines the requirements to which all institutions must refer in order to implement their QA procedures. It offers a battery of tools to support the structure in charge of QA in the continuous improvement of services rendered. It also provides tools for good governance of higher education institutions, and support in training and scientific research missions, as well as in all student support initiatives and their commitment to society.

This reference system consists of 5 domains divided up into 15 fields of activity involving 38 standards split into 146 criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1. Moroccan Reference of Evaluation and Quality Assurance

Domains	Fields	Standards	Criteria
Governance and Management of support functions	5	12	47
Training	3	6	32
Scientific Research	4	11	36
Accompanying students and student life	3	7	23
Service of the institution towards society	-	2	8
Total	15	38	146

The institutional evaluation is a two-step process (ANEAQ, 2020):

- The first step: the institution provides information corresponding to the criteria predefined in the reference. This data is integrated into a self-evaluation report that includes a critical analysis of the information.
- The second step: the analysis and validation of the institution's self-evaluation report and the on-site visit of ANEAQ's committee of experts are both used to elaborate the external report, which is sent to the institution for a final review. In addition, this report may also suggest follow-up and support for the institution in its action plans.

The external evaluation carried out by the Agency is based on the self-evaluation report drawn up by the self-evaluation committee within the institution. This report is not reduced to a compilation of data relating to the achievements and functioning of the establishment, but is rather analytical, evaluative and self-critical. Therefore, ANEAQ has developed a *self-evaluation guide* which is a synthetic and practical tool, intended for Moroccan higher education institutions, to accompany them in their self-evaluation process given the importance of the self-evaluation phase in the institutional evaluation process. The self-evaluation guide presents the principles and methodology followed in the drafting of the self-evaluation report, then proceeds through the phases of the evaluation process, namely:

1. preparation phase;
2. designation of the members of the self-evaluation committee phase;
3. data collection and processing phase.

then finally specifies the purposes, the structure and the process of validation and dissemination.

In addition, for the QA system to be effective as a whole, all stakeholders must be aware of and involved in its activities according to their roles within the Higher Education Institutions. It is essential that decision-making entities show support for all QA activities, from planning to implementation. Faculty members and staff should be encouraged to be more enthusiastic about implementing QA principles in their daily work.

Scope of ANEAQ's Action

Morocco's higher education system is marked by a dominance of public universities and a continued expansion of private universities. Currently, there are three main categories: public higher education, higher education in partnership and private higher education. Universities are composed of regulated and open-access institutions.

ANEAQ's task is to evaluate all public and private institutions at the national level. This includes for public higher education, 142 university-affiliated institutions (related to one of the 12 public universities) and 74 non-university affiliated institutions, 161 institutions in the private higher education (including Al akhawayne) and 32 institutions were created in the framework of the partnership (*Ministry of Higher Education, 2019*).

Aiming to establish a culture of quality and to institutionalize the practices of evaluation and continuous monitoring, ANEAQ is called upon to carry out the evaluation and expertise of public and private training programs at the national level. The number of training programs varies from year to year depending mainly on the number of accreditation renewals, which in return depends on the duration of accreditation, and the decisions made by the Ministry with regards to these accreditations.

To follow an improvement-oriented approach, the quality assurance agencies need to support the self-improvement process through a thoughtful self-evaluation exercise and an on-site visit by a team of quality assurance experts. The evaluation exercise will not be conducted as a ranking or rating tool instead it will provide conclusions and recommendations to agencies for their further development. In this regard, ANEAQ has been evaluated over a six-month period in 2018 (ANEAQ, 2019). The aim was to further test the evaluation methodology and promote awareness of ASG-QA and other aspects of the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF), thereby contributing to the consolidation of the quality culture, a transparent and harmonized approach to quality assurance in African higher education. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the African Higher Education Area (ASG, 2018) were based on the existing standards and guidelines of higher education already in use in African countries and by regional quality assurance networks or associations such as the Inter University Council of East Africa (IUCEA), the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) and the African and Malagache Council for Higher Education (CAMES) in Francophone Africa. Additionally, the ASG-QA were benchmarked with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) and other international standards and guidelines.

Quality Assurance in Moroccan Universities

The situation of QA in Moroccan universities has been investigated within the framework of cooperation projects, in particular: the RECET Project (2013-2016) and the EQUAM_M Project (2017-2021) through university surveys (questionnaires). The RECET project (Reinforcement of Competencies in Institutional Evaluation) 2013-2016 is a TEMPUS IV project that aims to develop the QA culture of Moroccan Higher

Education by strengthening competencies in institutional evaluation. It was coordinated at the national level by Hassan I Settat University. It brought together

- 15 Moroccan universities;
- 22 academic and institutional partners from Morocco and the European Union;
- Institutional actors: Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Executive Training and the Higher Education Council (INE).

Following the analysis of the data extracted from the questionnaires received from the universities, an assessment of the current state of evaluation and quality assurance was carried out. The questionnaire contains 82 questions divided into 5 sections:

- General questions (10 Q),
- Theme 1: Strategy and institutional QA policy (4 Q),
- Theme 2: Functional and Institutional Quality Assurance System (5 Q),
- Theme 3: Evaluation and Quality Assurance Skills and Training (5 Q),
- Theme 4: Cooperation Projects (8 Q).

The main conclusions drawn from this survey are:

1. Quality Assurance constitutes for all Moroccan universities a strategic axis aiming at the reinforcement of its training offer, the improvement of the quality and the internal efficiency, the valorization and the development of modes of governance and the institutional relationship with the socio-economic environment;
2. Governance is a priority domain for QA in Moroccan universities;
3. Several universities have already conducted self-evaluation and external evaluation (RECET,2016).

With the aim of updating information on quality assurance management in Morocco, the European EQUAM-M (Enhancing Quality Assurance Management in Morocco) project has drawn up a status report on quality assurance in Moroccan higher education in 2020. This investigation was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire, that is composed of 7 axes, and inspired by the *National Reference System of Evaluation and Quality Assurance* elaborated by ANEAQ. It is divided into 46 items:

- Identification of the university (4 items);
- Governance (5 items);
- Training offer (3 items);
- Student life (2 items);
- Research (3 items);
- Cooperation (2 items);
- Quality assurance (27 items).

The survey revealed that:

- 78% of the universities surveyed have a QA structure (unit, service or other forms) attached to the presidency and composed of 1 to 2 part-time administrative staff plus 1 to 2 qualified teachers in QA;
- The relationship between the QA structure and the institutions is not formalized;
- All the universities have already undergone self-evaluation in the framework of international cooperation projects and self-evaluation reports have been drafted, but with no real follow-up;
- 75% of universities have already experienced external evaluation in the framework of international cooperation projects (the whole university or certain components), but the evaluation reports have not been diffused and action plans for improvement have not been established (EQUAM_M, 2020).

Results

The Agency has used electronic processing during the whole procedure of evaluation of training programs since 2017. It has conducted four sessions of evaluation of training programs (more than 2,000 training programs in public and private institutions were evaluated). In 2018, ANEAQ evaluated the progress and monitored a sample of training programs that had been accredited in 2017 (157 programs evaluated in all 12 public universities). The objective of this monitoring is firstly to evaluate the functioning of the programs, while highlighting their specificities. And secondly to draw up a qualitative and quantitative comparison tool based on the strengths and weaknesses observed, with a goal to improve them and identify potentially replicable good practices (ANEAQ, 2018). The documentation of this on-site visit is ensured by the article 5 of Law 80-12 of ANEAQ: "...In accordance with the missions assigned to it, the Agency conducts field surveys and visits to the institutions under evaluation. It can consult and examine all the necessary documents and information, and interview the responsables, teaching staff, administrative staff, students and certain economic actors who have relations with the institutions under evaluation. To this end, all the institutions concerned by the evaluation should make available to the Agency all the above-mentioned documents and information. "

After publication of the national reference, a first series of evaluations of institutions were launched in June 2020, concerning 12 schools and faculties, one institution per public university. The universities themselves proposed the institutions to be evaluated. A second series of evaluation has just been initiated for the five universities created within the framework of a partnership with the State (UIR, UM6SS, UIASS, UM6P, UEMF). Each will designate an institution to be evaluated. Then will come the turn of private schools and universities. According to a five-year program, ANEAQ will evaluate a total of more than 390 institutions, which will help lay the groundwork and promote a culture of quality assurance in higher education and present a holistic picture of the sector.

The Agency produces an annual report, to be submitted to the supervising ministry, including the year's activities and recommendations for improving the quality of the institutions subject to the evaluation (ANEAQ, 2014). It also submits a report to the Head of the Government on results and prospects that emerge from the operations of the evaluations carried out (ANEAQ, 2014). The Agency publishes its annual reports and

transmits to universities and institutions the reports on evaluations carried out for their benefit, in order to present them to their councils.

The standardization of evaluation on the basis of the National Reference System for evaluation and quality assurance will enable the Agency, after an accumulated experience and a global evaluation of all higher education institutions, to rank them at the national level according to well-defined criteria. This ranking will create more competitiveness between institutions in terms of academic and institutional performance. Each higher education institution seeks a good image at the national and international level, which will allow to ensure a sufficient level of attractiveness for students and teacher-researchers nationally and internationally, to develop exchange programs, recognition of diplomas and scientific cooperation with the best foreign institutions. The construction of this image increases the need for internal and external evaluation of the institution's various activities.

Discussion

Evaluation plays an important role in educational policy orientations and choices in Morocco. However, evaluation of academic institutions as a whole is not a regular activity in the Moroccan higher education system. It is carried out only at the time of major reforms or within the framework of strategic or cooperative projects and does not necessarily concern all domains of the institution's activity (governance, training, scientific research, student life and service to society).

This explains the importance of the Agency's evaluation of institutions which aims to *harmonize and standardize* the practice of evaluation (external and internal) based on the same criteria (*National reference system*) covering all activities of the institution and to reach a certain *regularity and periodicity* of evaluations in the medium term. In addition, institutions are invited to produce self-evaluation reports structured according to the National reference system, which will lead to greater *maturity* in terms of *self-evaluation*.

Conclusion

Evaluation and quality assurance have been at the heart of the reforms of the Higher Education system and have become a major requirement and concern at the national and international level. The creation and operationalization of ANEAQ were the first steps to institutionalize the quality approach by putting in place processes, procedures and mechanisms, both practical and documented, aimed at establishing evaluation and quality culture in the Moroccan higher education. The good start of the Agency and the accomplishment of its missions are the results of a participatory approach including the different stakeholders in the evaluation and quality assurance process and a capitalization of good practices and past experiences carried out by higher education institutions.

Despite the existence of certain limitations and constraints in terms of quality assurance in the Moroccan higher education system, the analysis of the state of the evaluation of higher education conducted by ANEAQ during the five years of its activity and the ones planned in the medium and long term, shows that the agency is on the right track in the implementation of the quality assurance culture through a gradual institutionalization of evaluation and quality assurance practices and activities, while producing a set of reports, studies and analyses that are deemed valuable for decision-makers, teachers, students, administrative staff and socio-professionals.

Finally, the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with each institution, as agreed by the Ministers of Education of the countries participating in the Bologna Process (Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2003).

Recommendations

Strengthening the credibility and effectiveness of the evaluation and quality assurance system initiated by the agency depends essentially on the regular evaluation of its practices and the ability to modify them in the light of feedback from stakeholders to ensure continuous quality improvement. It must continually prove its added value through innovation, since an evaluation that does not evolve ends up becoming useless because it becomes too predictable. Finally, it must accompany changes and new policies in education and scientific research to maintain its relevance and usefulness. It is with this in mind that we propose the following recommendations to improve the evaluation and QA process:

Institutional level:

- Create evaluation and quality assurance units at each institution, while ensuring that human resources in the field of evaluation and quality assurance are strengthened through training and practice;
- Encourage and motivate institutions to set up internal evaluation activities;
- Develop an information system that is reliable and capable of providing relevant indicators on the functioning and performance of institutions, their entities and, above all, their training provision, to support decision-making and ensure effective quality management;
- Improve the budget allocated to the evaluation agency;
- Strengthen the agency's autonomy by placing it under the authority of the head of government instead of the higher education sector;
- Provide free access to the public of all the produced evaluation reports;
- Help institutions to develop an institutional culture of evaluation making them increasingly autonomous in this area;
- Provide a reference framework for evaluation and quality assurance for distance education.
- Training level:
- Integrate the socio-professional side in the evaluation process in order to target the needs of the labor market;
- Add the mission of teacher evaluation to the agency, like other agencies;
- Broaden the scope of evaluation of training courses through on-site visits and mid-term monitoring

instead of limiting it to checking papers alone;

- Review the CNPNs and the description books to give more precision to the definitions of the rules of the program's organization and management;
- Ensure the quality of the scientific evaluation of the courses (module contents) and the compliance of the descriptions with the CNPNs;
- Rehabilitate the oral exam as an important evaluation tool, especially during the selection of candidates for master's degrees, and motivate teachers more to this practice;
- Introduce elements related to the "personal development" (soft skills & soft employment) of the student is a judicious initiative. In its current form, it has a number of weaknesses and could be improved;
- Develop courses related to languages in order to facilitate learning;
- Integrate adequate performance measurement indicators in order to have more tools for quality management;
- Establish the training map of each institution (Faculties, Universities) with consolidation at the national level;
- Open the evaluation to other partners as a potential proposal (students, socio-economic actors, university partners, etc.);

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