



Indonesian Journal of Educational Research and Technology



Journal homepage: <http://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/IJERT/>

Empirical Analysis of Student Engagement and Learning Experiences in Quality Assurance: A Multiple Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study delves into the student learning experience within the context of Quality Assurance Management Systems (QAMS) in Malawian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The results of the study have shown that there is a disparity in terms of what is in books as policies and practices for higher education quality assurance and what happens on the ground concerning involving students in quality enhancement. The study has found that while HEIs are working hard to achieve quality in academic operations, their participation is very minimal. The study also found that both managers and students are much more willing to participate in quality assurance systems. However, students are not actively involved in quality assurance strengthening systems due to multiple barriers including minimal resources, tokenism, poor infrastructure, unconsolidated quality assurance systems, and students' apathy among others. Results have also shown that universities and colleges are much more concerned with compliance with conditions set by regulators than ensuring continuous improvement of quality assurance operations. In conclusion, the empirical analysis and reflections presented in this research contribute to the ongoing discourse on educational quality within Malawian HEIs. The insights gleaned from both university managers and students offer a holistic view of the current state of QAMS and pave the way for informed decisions and reforms that can enhance the quality of higher education in Malawi and serve as a reference point for similar contexts worldwide.

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 11 Sep 2023

First Revised 26 Nov 2023

Accepted 07 Jan 2024

First Available online 11 Jan 2024

Publication Date 01 Dec 2024

Keyword:

Higher education institutions,
Internal quality assurance,
Learning experiences,
Quality assurance management
systems,
Student engagement,
University education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the concept of quality assurance stands as a cornerstone, ensuring that the learning experiences of students remain at the forefront of institutional priorities. Quality assurance in higher education is not a static process but a dynamic endeavor that seeks to enhance the quality and relevance of education continually. At its core, this process recognizes that the key stakeholders—students—have a profound impact on the educational landscape. Their engagement, experiences, and perspectives are invaluable metrics in the pursuit of academic excellence. This introduction marks the inception of a comprehensive analysis aimed at delving deep into the intricate relationship between student engagement and their learning experiences within the realm of quality assurance. It underscores the pivotal role students play in shaping the educational environment, offering unique insights, and providing a critical lens through which the efficacy of quality assurance measures can be assessed. As we embark on this analytical journey, we will explore the multifaceted dimensions of student engagement, from their active participation in quality assurance processes to the myriad ways in which their feedback and experiences inform institutional decision-making. Furthermore, we will examine how quality assurance practices, when effectively designed and executed, contribute to enhancing the overall learning experiences of students and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and responsiveness within educational institutions.

This analysis will not only shed light on the intricate dynamics at play but also aim to provide practical insights and recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers. By fostering an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between student engagement and quality assurance, we aspire to contribute to the ongoing discourse on educational excellence and student-centered learning. Ultimately, this exploration underscores the fundamental truth that the voices, experiences, and engagement of students are central to the pursuit of educational quality and the enduring mission of higher education. Involving students in quality assurance processes is essential for ensuring that the educational experience meets their needs and expectations while also promoting transparency and accountability in higher education institutions. As explained by [Zhang et al. \(2022\)](#) involving students in Quality Assurance processes in higher education is not just a best practice but a crucial aspect of ensuring the effectiveness, relevance, and quality of educational programs and services. Students are primary stakeholders in higher education. Their experiences, needs, and perspectives should be at the center of quality assurance processes because they are the ones directly affected by the quality of education and support services. Students' feedback and insights provide a valuable source of information for identifying areas that require improvement. Their input can lead to positive changes in curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment practices, and student support services.

In Malawi's higher Education, quality has been described in line with compliance with the external institutional definition of quality as accountability, assurance, assessment, and audit. Quality definition that is imposed from the outside environment of the university does not consider the views of students, academicians, and other insiders who are directly affected but not directly involved. Such conditions of imposed evaluation of quality in Malawian higher education for example by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) have created gaps between the improvement of teaching and learning that exist at the students' level, quality evaluation at management and teaching level, and quality assurance methodologies that exist at the higher education control and compliance level. According to [Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist \(2016\)](#), compliance is the leading tool in the process of establishment and

development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education institutions in Malawi. According to the Malawi Government Education Sector Performance Report in 2021, Malawian universities are investing more resources to comply with external requirements as stated and dictated by the National Council for Higher Education but the outcome of such investments is poorly targeted and minimal so much that internal quality assurance is not achieved.

The Malawian literature on quality assurance puts much emphasis on standards, evaluation, and quality improvement as defined in the minimum standards of quality assurance by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in 2020. There is little evidence that is convincing to substantiate that Quality Assurance investments in Malawian higher education institutions have contributed to the improvement of student learning. In this case, there is a need to understand the levers that have the power and possibility to stimulate teaching and learning through continuous imperial improvements in higher education institutions to achieve quality assurance both internally and externally (Nyenya & Rupande, 2014). Thus, this study attempts to understand how to fill the existing knowledge gap between student learning and Quality Assurance systems through the exploration of Malawian higher education student learning experiences and how these can be integrated into Malawian Quality Assurance systems, procedures, and schemes for progressive quality assurance. The aim of the study hence is to develop new ways and strategies for putting into concept student experiences and approaches to Quality Assurance in Malawian universities. The paper also provides implications for Malawian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to improve the quality of education.

The purpose of this study was to explore and make analyses and reflections on student learning experience concerning quality assurance management systems in Malawian higher education institutions. In doing so, the study explored how students' learning experiences can be integrated into the quality assurance management systems at the university level to achieve continuous quality improvement. As explained by Chih-Pei and Chang (2017) to narrow the purpose of the study, there is a need for research questions that must be answered. As such, the formulation of research questions enabled us to identify the phenomenon to be studied and come up with a strategy for the successful carrying out of the research. The research question was: how are student learning experiences analyzed and used in the approaches to Quality Assurance systems in Malawian Higher Education institutions?.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Approach

The study adopted the mixed approach where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used. Qualitative case study is a research methodology that helps us to explore a phenomenon within some particular context using different sources of data. It is important as it helps us to conduct an in-depth exploration of the topic under study. This technique in the study is appropriate when we want to gain concrete, in-depth, and contextual knowledge about a real-world specific subject. Thus, we can explore key meanings, characteristics, and implications of the case under study. This research technique helped us to use the exploratory technique in the identified institutions and respondents of the study. Quantitative research can be described as the process of gathering and analyzing data numerically. Such data can be used to find averages and patterns, test causal relationships, and make predictions about a phenomenon. Thus, the purpose of using quantitative research is to acquire knowledge that can be used to gain an understanding of the social world through the interpretation of data numerically.

We also used the quantitative approach to study to observe events or situations that might affect people. As explained by Chih-Pei and Chang (2017) the quantitative study provides objective information and data that can be communicated clearly through statistical numbers. In this area of focus, the empirical analysis and reflections on the student learning experience of quality assurance management systems will be revealed through the use of descriptive statistics to give a clear picture of how such systems affect the quality assurance management of higher education. Thus, in this view, the use of a mixed approach in this study helped to have a clear understanding related to qualitative and quantitative research study. According to Creswell *et al.* (2011), a mixed approach is also important for triangulation purposes in research as it increases the validity and credibility of the research findings. **Figure 1** shows the mixed approach diagrammatic view of the study.

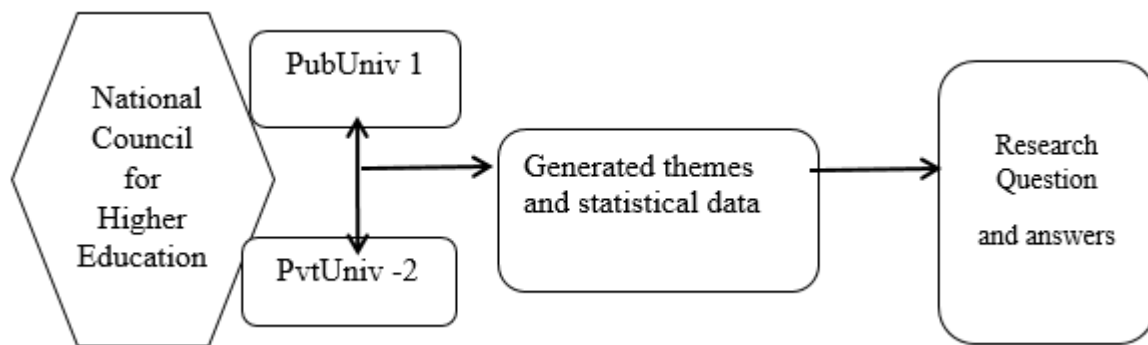


Figure 1. Multiple case study approach.

2.2. Study Sites and Participants

Two Universities located in the Southern region of Malawi were purposively selected due to the proximity of our place of residence to reduce the costs of the study as it was an academic self-funded study. Again, the National Council for Higher Education was also purposively selected to be one of the study sites since its prime duty is to regulate higher education in Malawi. The first study site was a public University located in the Southern part of Malawi in Blantyre District while the other study site is a private University which is also located in Chiradzulu District. As regards the number of participants in this study, data was collected from 200 students from the two universities each having 100 students. The public university had 26 managers because of the nature of the university and the number of departments. Again, the private university had 20 participants as managers based on the number of departments. Again, two (2) Quality Enhancement Officers from the National Council for Higher Education were selected. Thus, they would provide a regulatory point of view as far as higher education quality operations are concerned. Care was taken to establish predetermined selection criteria, ensuring that the process remains objective and minimizes potential biases. To address potential bias and align with the research questions and policy trajectory framework, "information-rich" policy actors were targeted for inclusion. These individuals were extensively involved in the development of policy instruments at the national level and directly affected by the implementation of the Quality Assurance system at the local level within universities. Through the selection of these specific policy actors, we aimed to gather insights and perspectives from individuals with relevant knowledge and experiences regarding the Quality Assurance system. This strategic approach facilitated the collection of rich and pertinent data, enabling us to address the research objectives and gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

2.3. Sampling Participants

In the study, we selected policy actors who could provide valuable insights into the development of the quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi. To achieve this, a qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing a strategic sampling strategy. We acknowledged the importance of sampling based on the study's purposes, research questions, and theoretical framework, rather than aiming for representativeness (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Details of respondents.

Institution	Criteria of participant	Sample
National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) PubUn1 - Public University	Quality Assurance Enhancement Officer	2
	Quality Assurance Director/Officer	1
	Registrar	1
	Dean of Students	1
	Deans of Faculties	7
	Heads of Department	10
	Students	100
PvtUn2 - Private University	Quality Assurance Director/Office	1
	Registrar	1
	Dean of Students	1
	Deans of Faculties	5
	Heads of Departments	17
	Students	100
	Total	240

The selected universities represent a diverse range of higher education institutions in Malawi, including private and public universities. This ensures that the study captures different organizational structures, governance models, and approaches to quality assurance management systems. The second reason for selecting such universities is that they have a variety of academic disciplines. The universities selected cover a variety of academic disciplines and areas of study. This allows for a comprehensive examination of quality assurance practices across different fields and their impact on the learning experiences of students in diverse academic programs. These universities are also well-established. The selected universities, both PubUni-1 and PvtUni-2 are well-established institutions with a significant presence and reputation in the higher education landscape of Malawi. Their extensive experience in implementing quality assurance management systems makes them valuable case universities to study.

Again, PubUni-1 is a specialized institution focused on accounting and related fields, bringing a unique perspective to the study. By including this college as a case university, the research managed to investigate the specific implications of quality assurance management systems on professional education and the development of specialized skills (James & Folorunso, 2012). More importantly, the selection of these universities takes into consideration the feasibility of data collection and the willingness of the institutions to participate in the research. It is important to ensure that the selected universities are open to collaborating and providing access to relevant information and resources. By including these universities as case universities, the study offers comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of quality assurance management systems in various types of institutions, representing different disciplines and professional domains in Malawi's higher education sector.

2.4. Data Collection

We collected data through the use of questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The questionnaires were open-ended questions to gather more data. This is important because it helped us to collect data more than just participating. Since the study used a mixed approach the use of questionnaires with both closed and open questions helped us to gather more important information from respondents through the triangulation method. The data was also gathered through focus group discussions. This approach of collecting data was used when gathering information with students. According to [Forman et al. \(2008\)](#), focus groups are important because it helps us to draw up respondent's feelings, analytical reflections, experiences, beliefs as well as reactions in a way that would not be much feasible using other methods. With this approach, we were able to gather data that had more details and insights into the key questions relating to the involvement of students in quality assurance management systems in higher education. More importantly, this approach helped us to have a hands-on approach while engaging the participants in the process of collecting data. We also used in-depth interviews to gather data from quality assurance administrators in both universities and regulatory bodies in higher education institutions. According to [Pathak et al. \(2013\)](#), interviews in qualitative study help us to better understand and explore the opinions, behavior, and experiences of research subjects. This is also a chance for us to gather much more in-depth information regarding the phenomenon. In this case, the interviews were semi-structured. This is so because we were allowed to ask the respondents where there could be a need for probing even though the questions were arranged in an orderly manner for respondents to answer. Semi-structured questionnaires are important in the mixed study as it helps us to delve deeply into a phenomenon and sometimes gather sensitive issues. For secondary data, we extracted data from public records, government publications, historical and statistical documents, technical and academic journals as well as books and reports among others.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

This study was academic as a product of PhD in Business and Management with the University of Zambia. As such, we had sought for Ethical Clearance letter from the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee of the University of Zambia. Again, we were also cleared by the study sites Universities and the National Council for Higher Education through clearance letters to conduct study in their institutions. Since this was an academic study, we made sure that the data was not connected to anyone else as a way of ensuring confidentiality and protecting the rights of respondents. We also made sure that anyone who took part in the study gave his or her informed consent. The other ethical point that we ensured to participants was that members participated voluntarily even if they were compelled to do so by the nature of this study.

2.6. Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analyzed through framework analysis. This is the method that involves different stages of for example data familiarization, developing themes, coding, charting, mapping, and finally interpretation. Data was analyzed through content analysis and narrative analysis. According to [Ethicist \(2015\)](#), content analysis entails the process of categorizing behavior or verbal data and classifying it into summarized and tabulated data that can make sense. On the other hand, content analysis entails the formulation of stories that have been presented by the respondents considering the experiences, and reflections of

the respondents regarding the phenomenon under discussion. Again, the qualitative data was analyzed through framework analysis. This is the method that involves different stages of for example data familiarization, developing themes, coding, charting, mapping, and finally interpretation.

Quantitative data was analyzed through the use of software called Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. The data analysis in quantitative study implies applying the logic statistically to a set of data that is well-cleaned and programd. In this case, the study used a descriptive statistical method to analyze data that can be described with no intention to generalize under the study. In this case, the analysis just reveals the description of information statistically without making conclusions application to the population under study. The data was also presented in the form of graphs, tables, and charts among others for easy interpretation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Idea of Quality in Higher Education

Although the concept of quality is not always used explicitly, it has been used usually so by many people outside and inside the higher education sector. Quality is a contested concept that is highly regarded and it has multiple meanings and ideas from individuals coming from different spheres of higher education. [Dallimore et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that there is a connection logically between different approaches to quality and the concept of higher education. In his argument, what is being explained as quality because of higher education is related to the values and ethics as well as fundamental aims of higher education in this case, we cannot define the approach of quality in the environment of human interaction without necessarily taking a normative position that is connected to what we all think higher education is likely to be. What we expect higher education to have some implications on how we regard quality to be, how much quality can be attained, how much quality can be evaluated in achieving it, and how much quality can be improved. As such, if a particular view of quality is given, it should be prepared to declare where we stand on the key purpose of higher education and management.

According to [Brennan and Shah \(2000\)](#), there are two categorical groups of higher education concepts. The first group looks at four dominant concepts of higher education that underline the approaches to higher education that are contemporary to definitions of quality. In this group of thinking, firstly higher education and quality are regarded as the production of qualified manpower. This concept is in line with the Malawi Vision 2063 agenda that entails producing quality manpower through quality higher education, the second component regards quality in higher education as the training ground for research careers for national development. This agrees with the National Planning Commission in 2022 which explained that for Malawi as a nation to advance in its agenda, there is a need for robust research in all fields of development for innovation and change management. Therefore, this means that quality in higher education centers on this notion of bringing career in research and development. Higher education quality is also regarded as the efficient management of teaching and learning provisions.

This is also regarded as a way of extending the life chances to people. In this case, this group of thinking and concepts reflects the reasoning of policymakers, managers in universities, funders, and other national groups of interest in higher education administration and management ([Shaban et al., 2014](#)). It is also important to note that these processes in higher education are external yet they drive the national debate as well as development in the work quality assessment, accreditation, and monitoring and evaluation by the regulators

of higher education in Malawi and beyond. Quality assurance is summarized by Brennan and Shan (2000) as it centers on the academic, managerial, pedagogical, and employment focus. The general overview is that what constitutes quality is the approaches in assessment and management (see Table 2).

Table 2. Quality assurance focus (Brennan & Shan, 2000).

Quality Level	Characteristics
Type 1 Academic	Subject focus - Knowledge and curricula Professorial authority Quality values vary across institution
Type 2 Managerial	Institutional focus- Policies and procedures Managerial authority Quality values variant across the institution
Type 3 Pedagogic	People focus - skills and competencies Staff developers and educationalist influence Quality values are both variant and invariant across the institution
Type 4 Employment Focus	Output focus - graduate standards and learning outcomes Employment and professional authority Quality values are both variant and invariant across the institution

There is a need for a systematic approach to education to achieve higher education with quality assessment, student learning experience, and effective management by university managers. As explained by the National Planning Commission in 2022 if higher education is perceived as a way of filling gaps in the labor market with a competent and productive labor force, one way of doing so could be by assessing the quality of students through understanding their student learning experience throughout their study life during their university education. This means that the understanding should not be only if they are employed but also look at whether they are employed in the job market that was envisaged by their program of study.

The second concept of higher education rests on the concern for student development or the processes in education to which students are exposed. According to the European Association for Quality Association in Higher Education in 2005, this idea includes the development of autonomy of the individual student in the process of obtaining intellectual integrity as well as the capacity to progress as a person. This concept also regards students as their formation of general perspectives and intellectual abilities. This is also in line with the development and enhancement of the character of individual students. Moreover, the Malawi Government Malawi Education Sector Analysis Report in 2019 argues that students are supposed to develop competence to participate in societal issues. This group of concepts in higher education is not usually reflected in the debate on quality assurance in higher education in the present world. Such a thinking system in higher education does not lead to institutional practice much easier as it does not get captured by the systematic procedures for evaluation for example numerical indicators of performance. Although they do not affect the validity in this area of conceptions, they are still necessary in higher education as they promote student learning experience in the academic life journey.

3.2. Malawian Context and Student Involvement

In the context of Malawi, student involvement in quality assurance is gaining increasing recognition and importance. The Ministry of Education and other stakeholders have recognized the importance of involving students in the quality assurance process, as they are

the primary beneficiaries of higher education and can provide valuable feedback on the educational experience. In recent years, Malawian universities and colleges have begun to involve students in various quality assurance initiatives, such as course evaluations and feedback mechanisms. Some institutions have established student-led committees that are responsible for providing feedback on various aspects of the educational experience, including teaching quality, assessment, and support services. In addition to providing feedback on the educational experience, students in Malawi have also been involved in other quality assurance activities, such as peer review of academic programs and the development of institutional policies and procedures (Kayange, 2021).

Students have been trained to provide constructive feedback on the quality of academic programs and to ensure that they meet the needs of students and are aligned with national and international standards. Overall, student involvement in quality assurance in Malawi is still in its early stages, but it is gaining momentum and recognition as an important part of ensuring the quality of higher education. According to the National Council for Higher Education in 2022, the involvement of students in quality assurance initiatives can help to ensure that the educational experience is aligned with the needs and expectations of students and can lead to improvements in teaching quality, support services, and overall student satisfaction. There are several challenges associated with student involvement in quality assurance in the Malawian context. According to Chawinga and Zozie (2016), one of the challenges concerns limited resources. Many universities and colleges in Malawi lack the resources needed to effectively involve students in quality assurance activities. This includes the lack of appropriate infrastructure, equipment, and training for students to participate in quality assurance initiatives.

The other challenge is the limited student representation. The level of student representation in quality assurance processes varies across institutions, and many students feel that their voices are not heard (Ali & Shastri, 2010). This can be due to a lack of student involvement in decision-making processes or a lack of effective communication between students and institution leadership. In addition, students are not aware of the importance of quality assurance in higher education or the role they can play in ensuring quality. There is also limited understanding of the importance of student involvement in quality assurance among some institution leadership. One of the major challenges is the limited institutional support for student's involvement in quality assurance. While some institutions have established mechanisms for student involvement in quality assurance, others have not. This lack of institutional support can hinder the ability of students to participate effectively in quality assurance initiatives.

At the same time, those students that are involved in quality assurance have limited capacity (Adegbesan, 2011). Some students may lack the capacity or skills needed to effectively participate in quality assurance initiatives. This can include the ability to provide constructive feedback or the ability to engage in critical thinking and analysis. As explained by Galafa (2019) addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort by institutions, students, and other stakeholders to prioritize and support student involvement in quality assurance. This can involve providing training and resources for students, increasing student representation in decision-making processes, and promoting awareness and understanding of the importance of quality assurance among all stakeholders.

3.3. Involvement of Students in Curriculum Review

The involvement of students in curriculum review is an important aspect of quality assurance in higher education. Students are the primary beneficiaries of educational

programs, and their involvement in curriculum review can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the curriculum and its relevance to their educational and career goals. Involving students in curriculum review can take different forms depending on the institution and the program being reviewed (Ayodele & Adebisi, 2013). Some common methods of involving students in curriculum review include student feedback surveys: Institutions can use surveys to collect feedback from students on various aspects of the curriculum, including course content, teaching methods, and assessment.

The feedback collected can be used to identify areas of strength and weakness in the curriculum and to inform decisions about curriculum development and revision. The other method could be through focus groups that can be used to gather more in-depth feedback from students on specific aspects of the curriculum. This can involve small group discussions led by a facilitator who asks students to share their experiences and opinions on different aspects of the curriculum. Student representation on curriculum review committees: Institutions can include student representatives on committees responsible for reviewing and revising the curriculum. These committees can provide students with an opportunity to engage in discussions about curriculum development and to provide feedback on proposed changes. Student-led reviews: Institutions can empower students to lead their reviews of the curriculum, either independently or in collaboration with faculty. This can involve conducting research, collecting feedback from peers, and presenting recommendations for curriculum revision. Involving students in curriculum review can help to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with the needs and expectations of students and that it is relevant to their educational and career goals. It can also help to promote a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for the quality of the educational experience.

3.4. Regulation of Higher Education in Malawi

The establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Malawi in 2011 led to the birth of functional regulation of operations of higher education. Previously, the Ministry of Education through the higher education department was responsible for regulation operations of higher education in Malawi. However, Kayange (2021) explained that with the development of private higher education institutions and the increase in enrolment of students in higher education, it was necessary to create an institution that would be responsible for promoting and regulating higher education institutions. NCHE provides a good stand for ensuring quality assurance through setting schemes, systems and operating procedures, and standards for ensuring higher education. Thus, there are different systems and approaches as well as deliberate processes and procedures that are supported by NCHE for higher education institutions to follow and implement. In addition, Kayange (2021) explained that institution quality assurance directorates play important roles in ensuring that the organization is following the right procedures for achieving quality assurance.

Higher education institutions must make sure that they conduct self-assessments concerning minimum set standards for quality assurance. This is important because it helps universities to make sure that they are checking themselves right before they are evaluated by the quality control institutions. However, a report by Galafa (2019) indicated that universities do not conduct self-assessment activities regularly and this led to dwindling standards of quality assurance in their operations. Some of the challenges include a lack of understanding of the process of carrying out self-assessment and evaluation, a lack of workforce competent to handle the exercise, and the need for thorough training on these aspects of higher education. However, the standards as set forth by NCHE on paper prove to be ideal for ensuring quality education (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). This entails that practically

what universities practice is not what is reflected in the minimum standards of quality as enshrined by the Ministry of Education through NCHE.

Universities should have a PhD holder if it is offering postgraduate programs. Likewise, if the university is offering undergraduate programs its lecturers must have postgraduate qualifications. In this case, the theory is that there will be an improvement in terms of the delivery of instructions by the lecturers. However, a report released by NCHE in 2021 explained that most private universities did not meet requirements as stipulated in the minimum standards that must be fulfilled by the university. Consequently, a good number of universities were asked to close their operations as they were deemed not fit to run academic programs. On another note, the European Association for Quality Association in Higher Education (2005) explained that the management of universities should consult or inform the student representative council when making decisions that affect the general academic environment. However, it has been noted that some universities do not engage the student representative council when making some key decisions to the point that there are consistent disruptions of academic activities up to the point of closing universities. This has been a proven fact that most university management rarely engages students when making key decisions that affect teaching and learning.

3.5. Involvement of Students in Cyclical Review

We centered on examining how students are involved in the academic cyclical review process. Involving students in cyclical program reviews is an essential aspect of quality assurance and improvement in higher education. The cyclical program review process typically involves periodic assessments and evaluations of academic programs to ensure they meet established standards and goals (Kajawo & Dong, 2020). Including students in this process can provide valuable insights and perspectives. As highlighted universities can include students as members of the program review committees. These committees are responsible for evaluating and assessing the quality and effectiveness of academic programs. Student representatives can provide a student-centric viewpoint and contribute to discussions about program strengths and weaknesses. Nearly all institutions surveyed incorporate students into program reviews as shown in **Figure 2**. However, involving students in processes like SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) or SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) analysis, which assess program strengths and improvement opportunities, learning outcome development, and curriculum mapping, was less common.

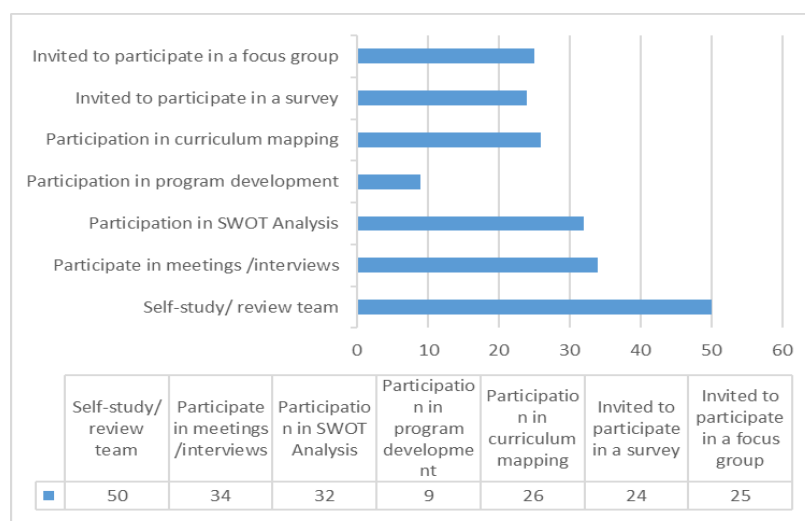


Figure 2. Analysis of involvement of students in quality assurance systems.

A majority of the respondents also sought alumni participation in their review procedures, mainly through surveys, focus groups, and site visits. Cockburn's framework in 2006 categorizes student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement activities into three ascending levels: Opportunity (participation in events), Attendance (attending events), and Engagement (attending and effectively contributing). The most prevalent forms of involvement reported by survey participants, such as attending site visit meetings, participating in focus groups, and completing surveys, aligned with the Opportunity level. Less frequently, students engaged at the Engagement level, which involves contributions to cyclical review self-study reports, and curriculum review activities like learning outcome development and curriculum mapping. The pattern for alumni engagement data was quite similar, with survey participation being the most common form.

This analysis implies that, in many Malawian institutions, student participation in quality assurance processes is largely symbolic or performative. It is worth noting that the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) was significantly initiated in 2011, and this context could help explain the present state of student engagement in quality assurance processes. The results of the study largely aligned with our initial expectations. It is observed that the most prevalent forms of participation, such as attending site visit meetings, taking part in focus groups, and completing surveys, fell within the categories of Opportunity or Attendance, rather than engagement. In contrast, fewer instances were reported where students engaged in more involved activities, such as contributing to the review of self-study reports or participating in curriculum review processes like shaping learning outcomes and curriculum mapping. Similar trends were evident in alumni engagement, where survey participation emerged as the most common form of involvement. Apart from identifying the various forms of student involvement, participants were also asked to provide insights into the effectiveness of these practices. Many respondents pointed out that focus groups yielded more meaningful feedback compared to surveys.

We also looked at how students were involved in the quality assurance operations of the Universities for continuous improvement. **Figure 3** shows the responses from students.

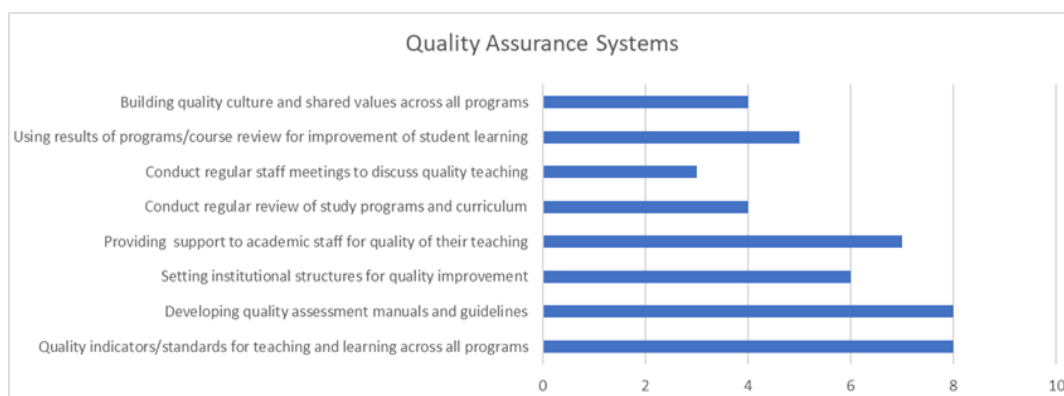


Figure 3. Involvement of students in quality assurance systems.

Interestingly, respondents indicated that the practices their institutions didn't currently prioritize, such as participation in curricular review processes, were considered to have the potential for greater effectiveness. We also found it notable that several respondents acknowledged in the open-ended question at the end of the survey that existing institutional processes were minimal and could evolve to hold more significance. Many respondents distinguished current practices and their ideal or potential counterparts, highlighting that the evolution of methods for involving students in quality assurance processes was a continuous endeavor. This suggests that the development of more meaningful student engagement in

quality assurance processes is an ongoing process. Participants were also queried about their efforts to ensure diversity in the representation of students within quality assurance processes. The responses to this inquiry, imply that during a phase when many institutions were in the process of enhancing student involvement, achieving comprehensive diversity in participation was an objective yet to be fully realized. Notably, while diversifying participation was a goal, it often remained aspirational. The range of students included in quality assurance processes under the umbrella of diversity comprised various categories, encompassing first-generation students, international students, mature learners, indigenous students, and transfer students, among others. Quite notably so, the NCHC often considers student feedback as an important component of quality assurance as testified in this quote:

“NCHC as a regulator of Higher education in Malawi may review student evaluations and surveys to gauge the quality of teaching, learning experiences, and support services”. (Pub Uni-2-QAO).

It is important to acknowledge that since the development of these questions, postsecondary institutions have intensified their efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and have continued to expand their understanding of the complexities of diversity within academic communities. In response to this question, participants were allowed to provide context for their survey selections. The feedback highlighted that achieving participation itself could sometimes be challenging. Ensuring a diversity of voices was often viewed as aspirational, with the primary focus being on the availability and willingness of students to engage. This suggests that while the aspiration for diverse involvement exists, practical constraints related to student availability and willingness still play a significant role. This suggests that while the aspiration for diverse involvement exists, practical constraints related to student availability and willingness still play a significant role. When posed with the query, "Are there any ways in which students at your institution are presented with the results of the cyclical review?" the findings highlighted a notable scarcity of institutions that had established a mechanism to effectively "close the loop" by informing students about how their feedback, or the broader review process, contributed to enhancing program quality. 63% of respondents who were university managers indicated the absence of a formal procedure to communicate the outcomes of cyclical review processes back to students.

3.6. Varieties of Student Involvement

The examination of both survey and interview data underscored the diversity in the scope and character of strategies employed for involving students. What rendered this discovery intriguing was that the divergence within individual institutions was far more pronounced compared to the disparities observed across different respondents. In essence, there seemed to be a considerable spectrum of approaches to engaging students in quality assurance processes, manifesting not only across various institutional programs but also within the programs themselves (Nyenya & Rupande, 2014). Guided by the engagement models that existing literature furnishes on this study, this range of approaches was mapped onto a spectrum of student engagement. This visualization effectively highlights the wide array of strategies used and the varying levels of engagement observed. This spectrum serves as a visual representation of the multitude of ways in which students are integrated into quality assurance practices, emphasizing the intricate diversity existing within institutions and programs. Visualizing this spectrum, at the far left, it is noted that programs do not incorporate student engagement in any facet of the quality assurance process. It is important to note that results revealed that no institutions indicated a complete absence of student involvement in their quality assurance processes as in **Figure 4**.

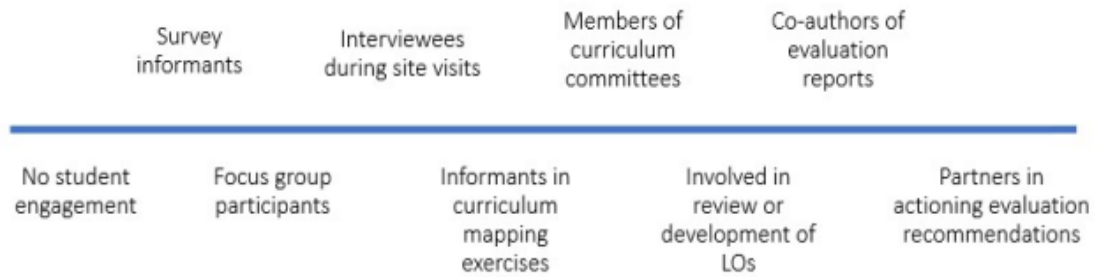


Figure 4. Spectrum of student engagement in quality assurance.

Moving towards the right on the spectrum, some programs solicit student input through mechanisms like surveys and focus groups. As anticipated, the analyzed data demonstrated that surveys and focus groups were the most prevalent forms of student engagement. Continuing along the spectrum, a more substantive level of student engagement emerges, where students are recognized as both informants and active participants. This occurs when students share their insights through testimonials during site visits by external reviewers and contribute to activities such as curriculum mapping exercises. Progressing further, we encounter sustained levels of engagement, where students take on roles as committee members and contribute their expertise to aspects of curriculum development processes. This level signifies deeper and ongoing involvement in quality assurance activities.

Finally, at the far-right end of the spectrum, we arrive at collaborative engagement opportunities. Here, students take on co-authorship roles in evaluation outcomes and co-ownership in implementing recommended actions that follow the evaluation process. This represents a pinnacle of student involvement, demonstrating a high level of partnership and agency in shaping program quality (Smith & Johnson, 2020). This spectrum visually captures the evolving nature of student engagement in quality assurance processes, ranging from minimal involvement to comprehensive collaboration and co-ownership. Transitioning along the spectrum of engagement, a noticeable shift occurs like student involvement – from being an informant to a representative, then to an expert, and ultimately to a collaborator. To provide clarity in understanding the various modes of student engagement found on this spectrum, it have categorized them into four distinct roles:

- (i) Student as an Information Provider: In this role, students are sought out for feedback on their experiences or specific insights on particular themes, as requested by a program. Their engagement primarily involves contributing feedback or information.
- (ii) Student as an Actor: Here, students serve not only as informants about their learning experiences but also offer suggestions and recommendations for change. They actively contribute to shaping improvements.
- (iii) Student as an Expert: In this capacity, students' experiences and insights hold equal significance, as they participate as full members of planning and decision-making committees. Their expertise is considered on par with faculty and staff members.
- (iv) Student as a Partner: This highest level of engagement involves students becoming true collaborative partners in quality assurance work. They are actively involved in reporting results, planning actions based on recommendations, and contributing to the broader quality assurance process.

While student engagement in quality assurance processes takes various forms, the mutual benefits that emerge when sustained collaborative opportunities for student engagement are interwoven into every stage of the quality assurance process. Notably, when students are engaged as experts or partners, both programs and students reap rewards (Galafa, 2019).

Programs experience a strengthened sense of community and shared investment in program success, while students gain deeper disciplinary knowledge, exposure to committee-related responsibilities, and the cultivation of teamwork and leadership abilities.

Effectively integrating students as experts and partners requires acknowledging and mitigating the inherent power dynamics between students and faculty/staff members. These dynamics can sometimes dilute the significance of student contributions. This resonates with the principles of community, where active engagement of both students and staff is vital for fostering a constructive culture of quality assurance and program enhancement. The outcomes of this study mirror the pivotal role of institutional culture. This theme consistently emerged in both surveys and interviews as a catalyst driving intentional student engagement or as a factor sustaining engagement efforts.

3.7. Factors of Influence in Quality Assurance at the University Level

Factors of influence refer to the various elements or variables that have an impact on a particular process, situation, or outcome (Smith & Johnson, 2020). In the context of student engagement in quality assurance processes, factors of influence are the elements that shape the extent, nature, and effectiveness of student involvement. These factors can encompass a wide range of elements, including institutional policies, program culture, student motivation, faculty support, available resources, historical context, and more. Understanding the factors of influence is crucial for designing effective strategies to enhance student engagement in quality assurance processes. By identifying and addressing these factors, institutions can create an environment that fosters meaningful and sustainable student participation, contributing to the overall improvement of educational programs and quality assurance practices. Student engagement within institutional quality assurance processes is shaped by a combination of factors linked to institutional culture, contextual considerations, and the institution's capacity.

According to Shabani *et al.* (2014), these factors are dynamic and can be influenced and modified over time. The degree to which an institution is inclined to involve students as genuine partners in quality assurance activities, allowing for authentic engagement and earnest consideration of their input, is deeply ingrained in the motivations and values driving the institution and its members in their quality assurance processes and endeavors to enhance quality. Numerous other factors contribute to this landscape. For instance, the power dynamics and trust relationships prevalent within a program or among different tiers of participants in the review process play a pivotal role in influencing student engagement.

According to Kayange (2021), contextual factors arising from both internal and external quality assurance policy frameworks exert an impact as well. Additionally, the availability of necessary human and financial resources is a key determinant of an institution's capability to establish and sustain effective student engagement within quality assurance processes (Galafa, 2019). The level of student engagement in institutional quality assurance activities is shaped by a multifaceted interplay of factors. These factors range from the institution's cultural disposition and its willingness to collaborate with students to the power dynamics within the review process, external policy frameworks, and the resources available for meaningful student involvement. Understanding and addressing these factors are crucial steps for fostering a conducive environment that promotes meaningful and impactful student engagement in quality assurance processes. Assessing an institution's cultural stance towards quality assurance involves contemplating how colleges and universities conceptualize quality assurance processes.

This involves considering whether quality assurance is seen as a means to gain a deeper grasp of a study program, to engage in curriculum development, to enhance the academic community, or if it is perceived more as a set of obligatory actions carried out in performative, perfunctory ways to fulfill accountability requirements. When the prevailing culture regards quality assurance processes primarily as a platform for structured and informed collective analysis of program strengths, weaknesses, and future trajectories. All these are for the betterment of educators, researchers, and learners within the institution's scope. This eventually led students to be more likely acknowledged as possessing genuine and distinct viewpoints. In such an environment, students share responsibility for the outcomes of collaboration, and their perspectives are valued. This cultural orientation signifies a meaningful sharing of power, linked to "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis".

However, it's worth noting that not all institutions universally embrace the idea of students as active partners in quality assurance. Some institutions may view quality assurance as obligatory rituals driven by accountability, potentially involving only a limited circle of contributors. The socio-cultural aspect of quality assurance activities, scrutinizing academic culture, disciplinary power dynamics, and the potential overemphasis on performativity. These factors can lead to student disengagement and a tendency to view students as outsiders, consumers, or customers rather than integral members of the academic community. Perceiving students as customers can alter their role and engagement in quality assurance processes, possibly resulting in less substantial or profound involvement. This perspective can impact the depth and authenticity of student participation in quality assurance activities. However, it is important to acknowledge that students are not universally recognized as equal partners in quality assurance processes. Additionally, institutions don't always view quality assurance processes as more than obligatory routines for accountability, often limited to a select group of participants. The socio-cultural landscape of quality assurance activities to explore dimensions of academic culture, disciplinary power dynamics, and indications of an excessive emphasis on performativity.

3.8. Factors of influence in student involvement in Quality Assurance Systems

One area of concern was to analyze factors that influence the participation of students in quality assurance. **Figure 5** shows some of the factors that hinder the involvement of students in Quality assurance systems at the institutional level.

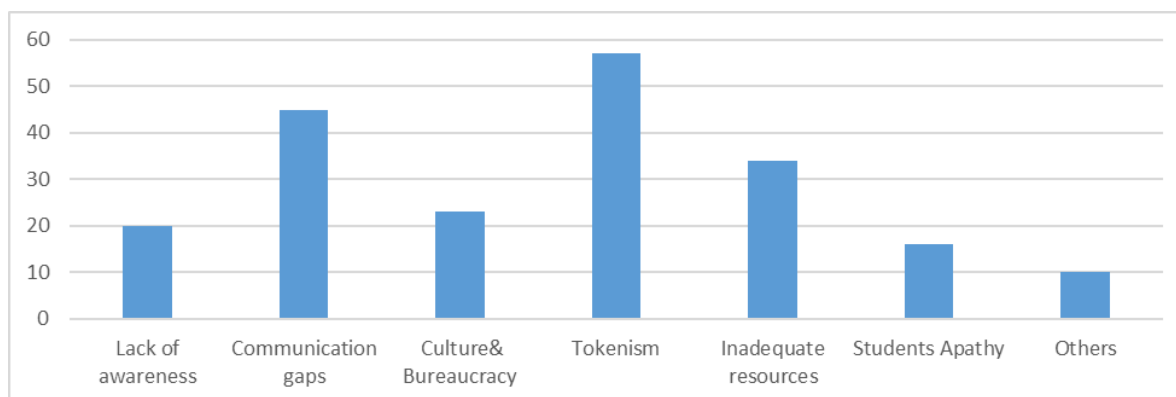


Figure 5. Factors hindering the involvement of students in quality assurance systems.

These factors can lead to students feeling disconnected and institutions being inclined to label students as outsiders, consumers, or customers instead of embracing them as integral members of the academic community. Mann & McLeod's examination raises questions about how academic culture and a focus on performative aspects can affect student engagement. These factors can shape an environment where students aren't fully integrated as partners in quality assurance processes, leading to a lack of authenticity and depth in their involvement. This notion aligns observation that viewing students as customers can bring about a transformation in their role in quality assurance processes. While student participation isn't necessarily excluded, it undergoes a fundamental shift.

This shift is associated with less frequent or more superficial engagement of students in quality assurance activities, which ultimately impacts the quality and effectiveness of their input. The extent of student participation in various quality assurance and improvement endeavors during the five- to eight-year review cycle is also impacted by the contextual expectations for student engagement outlined in the quality assurance process standards of the institution and its external governing bodies. These contextual influences can be observed within the institution's quality assurance policies, procedures, and practices, as well as in the guidance provided by external quality assurance bodies and accrediting organizations that set forth expectations for student involvement in quality assurance activities.

Within colleges and universities, the values and priorities of academic leaders significantly shape the approach to integrating student perspectives in processes conducted throughout their academic journey. Countries such as the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Norway exemplify quality assurance systems that endorse substantial student engagement. In the UK, the 2018 Quality Assurance Agency Quality Code mandates that institutions involve students both individually and collectively in assuring and enhancing educational quality primarily through mechanisms of student feedback and collective representation. The Irish Higher Education Quality Network in 2009 documentation underscores the belief that student participation in quality assurance contributes to quality improvement, recognizing students' valid insights and making participation an essential facet of belonging to the academic community. The approach in Norway mandates student partnerships as a prerequisite for engagement in the National Centre for Excellence in Education.

3.9. Malawian Context and Student Engagement in Quality Assurance

Particularly, in Malawi, the National Council for Higher Education expects student input, such as incorporating student feedback on course data and encouraging student engagement in quality assurance processes, but these expectations are contingent upon alignment with the institution's internal policies and practices. The study has found that while the guide recommends active student involvement in agenda-setting, self-analysis, report preparation, and meetings with external reviews, these are suggested rather than mandatory practices. Quality assurance guidelines, whether internal or external, that establish robust expectations for authentic student engagement in quality assurance processes, rather than performative involvement, foster a culture of commitment to self-regulation and improvement. This is in agreement with Chikazingwa who explained that such guidelines align with the concept that quality improvement is a dynamic dialogue.

As Harvey and Newton articulated, consequential conversations within academic communities that include students cannot be simply regulated; they occur through critical engagement. When asked about their involvement in quality assurance decisions 174 students out of 200 students representing 87% highlighted that they were just being used in

the form of tokenism. This is also in agreement with the responses that NCHE respondents supplied as quoted below:

"When the accreditation body comes for a visit, an analysis of the responses shows that students are told to sing praises of their university. But when the spot checks reveal the unpolished truth, it is a different tune altogether." NCHE – Quality Enhancement Officer.

In essence, the degree of student participation in Quality Assurance processes is influenced by the contextual landscape, institutional policies, external quality assurance expectations, and the ethos of academic leadership. Approaches that prioritize meaningful student engagement over superficial involvement contribute to a culture of continuous improvement and dialogue. The capacity of a college or university to effectively engage students in quality assurance processes varies and significantly influences the level of student involvement. The study has also pinpointed that the presence or absence of adequate financial and human resources plays a pivotal role in either facilitating or hindering student engagement in quality assurance activities. This is in agreement with Upadhyay and Paul (2019) who explained that the availability of resources directly impacts the institution's ability to establish practices that foster meaningful student participation. Limited access to essential financial and human resources can impede students' involvement in quality assurance processes. Conversely, dedicated resources can empower effective engagement.

The study also revealed that public higher learning institutions have a higher chance of funding and including students' views in quality assurance than private universities. Engaging students requires financial resources to provide necessary support and expertise, ensuring successful student recruitment, selection, orientation, and participation in quality assurance activities. Comprehensive documentation and clear communication are vital components of effective student engagement. Students must comprehend their roles and responsibilities concerning other contributors throughout their engagement and must have confidence that their contributions hold significance and will be acted upon. Resources are essential for adequately preparing students to contribute meaningfully, offering appropriate coaching throughout the process, and ensuring follow-up on student input once it is gathered.

The importance of prompt and barrier-free communication of outcomes stemming from student participation in quality assurance. Delays or obstacles in conveying these outcomes can lead to further frustration among students and undermine trust in the processes. Successful partnership with students hinges on their perception that their ideas are taken seriously and their feedback genuinely influences the quality of education provided by the university. When students perceive a higher degree of involvement and believe their contributions are valued, they tend to take on greater responsibility and invest more effort in their input. Furthermore, such engagement offers students a deeper understanding of quality assurance process objectives and purposes, the intricate web of relationships, traditions, and systems under scrutiny, and potentially leads to more nuanced insights into where, when, and how improvements can and cannot be instituted by program faculty or the broader institution. They recognize their role in contributing to the quality of education but may not know how to actively participate. However, one of the respondents from PubUniv- 1 had this to say:

"Students have been actively involved in quality assurance efforts, providing valuable feedback and insights; however, we are yet to witness significant improvements in the quality of our educational programs and services." PvtUni-1 – Student.

In essence, the availability of necessary resources shapes the effectiveness of student engagement and can significantly impact the overall success of quality assurance processes

3.10. Approaches to Quality Assurance.

On the question of the most used approach to quality assurance, **Figure 6** shows the prominent responses from university managers. The study found that universities use NCHE and other regulatory bodies, internal quality assurance, faculty development, and student feedback surveys as the most appropriate approaches to quality assurance. The responses showed that most universities believe that by complying with NCHE standards 42% (16/38) they will achieve quality education to students. In terms of student's views, 15% of the respondents highlighted that they regard student feedback survey as an important item in ensuring quality assurance. However, the low ranking of students' views is in agreement with what Chikazinga explained that universities rarely use the views of students in the process of developing quality assurance policies and procedures. Issues of internal quality assurance mechanisms include curriculum development, examination moderation, self-assessment, and continuous improvement at the university level.

As regards faculty development, the universities have plans for faculty professional development as lecturers were sent for further academic studies as well as having short courses for professional development. Some respondents highlighted that they do have professional training like pedagogy, assessment, information technology, and leadership training. This also is in line with compliance with education regulators like NCHE. Notably, this study has established that while universities ensure that there is a need for students' views and participation in higher education for quality improvement, the implementation has been taken at a snailly pace. In general, students are not actively involved in quality assurance systems.

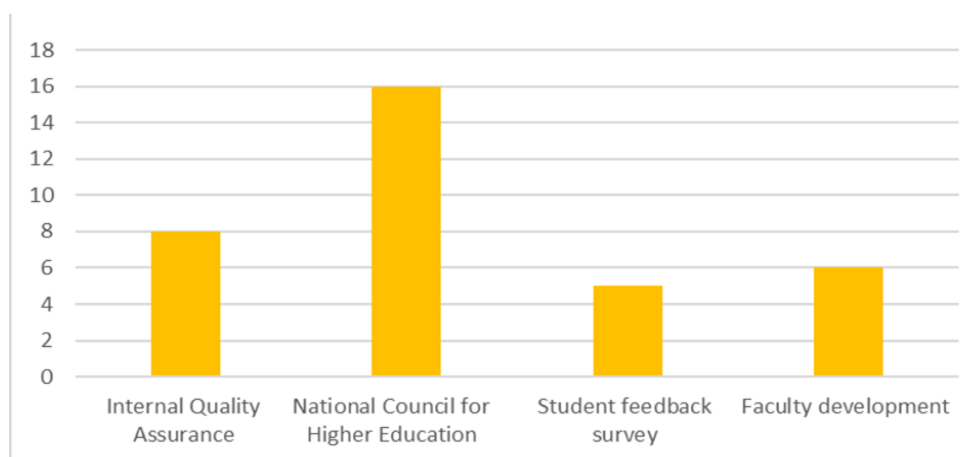


Figure 6. Ranking of university managers on quality assurance approaches.

3.11. Area for Future Research

It is suggested that future research or contributions in this area could center on case studies that examine the transformation or establishment of institutional cultures aimed at involving students more significantly as collaborative partners in quality assurance processes and other related areas. These case studies could spotlight tangible strategies, some of which we have endeavored to outline in the preceding section, showing how staff members within quality assurance and those collaborating with quality assurance efforts can play a pivotal role in fostering this transformation by integrating engagement practices that enhance student

participation. The prevailing methods of involving students in quality assurance practices throughout Malawi, while widespread, often fail to acknowledge the fundamental importance of their unique perspectives and experiences within the program. The obstacles to student engagement need not be insurmountable if we are willing to listen to and actively involve students as essential contributors and collaborators. In the previous sections, we have outlined effective practices and suggested principles for consideration, which can serve as a foundation for fostering robust and enduring engagement, whether starting anew or continuing the ongoing dialogue. I anticipate that this dissertation, stemming from the research project, will be a valuable resource for institutions seeking to stimulate discussions, improve their practices, and generate innovative concepts for involving students more significantly in the ongoing enhancement of academic programs and conversations surrounding academic excellence.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the multifaceted exploration of student involvement in cyclical review, the diverse forms of student engagement, the influential factors in quality assurance, and the specific context of Malawi's student engagement in quality assurance collectively highlight the critical role students play in shaping the quality of education. The discussion on student involvement in cyclical review underscores the significance of their contributions in ensuring the continuous improvement of educational programs. Various levels and modes of engagement, as outlined, demonstrate the flexibility and adaptability of student participation across different aspects of quality assurance. The examination of factors influencing quality assurance reinforces the idea that student involvement is intricately linked to institutional and cultural dynamics. Recognizing these factors is crucial for designing effective strategies to overcome barriers and enhance student participation. The unique context of Malawi serves as a valuable case study, illustrating the evolving landscape of student engagement in a specific national setting. While there are challenges to address, the commitment to inclusivity and student involvement is evident. In sum, the collective insights provided in this discussion underscore the pivotal role of students in shaping the quality assurance processes within educational institutions. By fostering an environment that encourages and values their contributions, institutions worldwide can harness the full potential of student engagement, ultimately leading to more effective, student-centered, and continuously improving education systems. It is imperative that educational stakeholders embrace and prioritize student involvement as an essential component of quality assurance, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of those most affected by educational outcomes are heard and acted upon.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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