AUN-QA Framework
for
Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

"Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders." - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) in a University

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) comprises the processes, supported by policies, structures and systems, that the University establishes to maintain and enhance its quality of education. It is essential for each University to put in place its own IQA system to monitor, evaluate, and improve its quality of education, research, and service. However, there is no one IQA system or model that would suit the needs of all institutions. Each university, therefore, needs to build its own system that best fits its own vision and mission, culture, development needs and regulatory requirements. The IQA of the university also needs to complement its external quality assurance (EQA) system.[1]

The IQA of a University includes its own internal academic reviews, audits and assessments, and at the same time also ensures compliance with regulatory requirements of government and professional organizations. In addition, the IQA also involves various external assessments, whether at the programme or institutional levels, as well as international accreditation. And to some extent, the IQA of a university also deals with external bodies such as University ranking systems, QA award-giving agencies, and the like.

The University Strategic Environment of IQA Framework

The AUN-QA adopts a 4-component IQA framework that revolves around the "University Strategic Environment" that puts together the various internal and external *stakeholder needs* and expectations, considers the *national and international requirements* and regulations, and takes into account the *PESTLE factors* that offer both constraints and opportunities in the fulfillment of the university's Vision and Mission.

The PESTLE factors include the political, economic, social, technological landscape in which the University is situated, as well as various legal and environmental requirements and regulations that universities must abide by. These PESTLE factors would obviously differ from one country to another. In fact, the PESTLE factors may also differ significantly from one university to another even within the same country, such as for public vs private universities.

A further essential consideration of the "University Strategic Environment" is the *university context*. Examples of this unique university context would include a specific religious or evangelical mission, a mandate to promote the lifelong learning skills of women, or a privately-sponsored educational model that caters exclusively to part-time students who are already in the workforce but would want to complete a full-fledged Bachelor's degree.

[1] Guide to AUN-QA Assessment at Institutional Level, Version 3.0. Bangkok: ASEAN University Network, 2022.

Figure 1. The components of the AUN-QA IQA Framework with the University Strategic Environment at the core

In the ideal scenario, the University Strategic Environment is encapsulated in the Vision-Mission, and all the QA plans, systems and processes are rendered actionable on a regular cycle of one to five years via a Strategic Plan. When these are available, the "fitness of purpose" would have been

established. And thus, the Vision-Mission and the Strategic Plan would be where the IQA of the university will need to anchor on and align with.

On the other hand, when there is no Vision-Mission, and/or no Strategic Plan, it will be difficult to assess the "fitness for purpose" that the IQA is to be latched on, since most of the QA policies, systems, and processes will be dealing with moving or unclear targets. In this case, the assessment of alignment will be futile, and the quality of the output and outcomes will be very difficult to evaluate.

Indeed, the human and physical resources that are made available to students, the campus infrastructure and services, as well as all the policies for education, research and community engagement are directed towards the proper implementation of the Strategic Plan, which in turn is intended to move the University towards its Vision-Mission. On the other end are the quality of the student cohorts, the research and innovation performance, as well as the collective engagement of students and faculty members in the university's designated "communities". These are the outcomes, outputs and results of the University operations which are also, themselves, assessed for their quality based on the same Strategic Plan.

IQA Components in a Cycle of Continuous Improvement

The AUN-QA IQA framework establishes four components that are in a perpetual "quality enhancement cycle" around the University Strategic Environment. These components are the following:

- QA Organization and Policies
- QA Systems and Processes
- Data Analytics and Information Management
- Evaluation and Enhancement

These QA plans, systems, and processes iterate continuously and have built-in mechanisms for monitoring the quality of university programmes according to pre-set key performance indicators and targets. And based on data that have been collected and analyzed, possibly subjected to benchmarking and evaluation of outputs and outcomes, the IQA of a university would have re-calibration and adjustment mechanisms to assure system and process improvements along the way.

Having established the University Strategic Environment, the four basic IQA components must be put in place before a proper Quality Assurance system can start to function. However, each of

these components will necessarily vary from one institution to another, depending on the institutions' priorities, resources, internal organizational dynamics, and also its maturity as an organization.

Mature universities that have been in operation for a long time, or those who have invested heavily on establishing a working QA system right from their early years of operation, already have many of these IQA components in place. All they need to do is to subject these components to continuous improvement, and also routinely assess whether the IQA system as a whole continues to be relevant and effective given the possibly changing University Strategic Environment.

The younger universities, however, may have some or even most of these components missing. Or at best, some early forms of these components are in place but are mostly not operating in sync with the other IQA components. This is likely because some of the components, or their sub-components, may be in place for reasons other than for ensuring quality in the university operations, and especially in the quality of its graduates. For example, there may have been existing student enrollment monitoring, but this may have been in place for compliance with government annual reporting requirements, and not used as basis for analyzing the relative distribution of enrolled students in the different study programmes with the intention of delivering the study programmes in a more efficient manner. Another example is the tracking of alumni, which might be done not necessarily to study the relevance of the curriculum in the graduates' places of work, but more for identifying potential donors among the successful, wealthy alumni.

Each of the four basic components in the AUN-QA IQA Framework will be explained below, along with their most important sub-components.

Component 1 : QA Organization and Policies

QA Organization and Policies encompass the organizational structure, guidelines, and policies related to the QA system of the university, taking into consideration the institution's specific strategic environment and its unique context. These can only be established effectively if the University Strategic Environment is clear and well-documented. In particular, the QA organization and policies need to be consistent and aligned with the University's Vision and Mission, that in turn, necessitates alignment with internal and external stakeholder needs, while fully cognizant of the resources available to the university as well as all the PESTLE factors in which the University is operating.

Figure 2. The sub-components of QA Organization and Policies

The AUN-QA recommends that the following sub-components of *QA Organization and Policies* are established and subjected to continual improvement. These include, but are not limited to :

- structure of the QA office(s)
- authority and scope of responsibility associated with the QA office(s)
- policies related to education
- policies related to research and innovation
- policies related to the community engagement of students and faculty members

Furthermore, recognizing that universities have different strategic environments and may have very special mandates or unique contexts, the AUN-QA encourages institutions to include such other sub-components under *QA Organization and Policies* that may not fall squarely under any of the sub-components listed above.

Obviously, the IQA in a university cannot operate by itself without institutional mechanisms and organizational elements that will plan, execute, monitor and improve the institution's QA systems and related pursuits. Depending on the organizational culture and resources, a University can centralize all its QA-related efforts in a single office, usually either under the Vice-President for Academics or even the Provost, President or Rector. Under this set-up, university-wide QA trainings (e.g. on shift to OBE, use of LMS), as well as adoption of syllabus templates, use of

assessment rubrics, scheduling of QA assessments or accreditation by external bodies, and such other QA-related initiatives can be done more efficiently.

The more mature universities, however, would usually opt for a semi- or fully decentralized QA organization and system, where the QA policies, systems, and processes are meant to be specific to an academic unit of the University such as a Faculty or a College. This organizational structure for the implementation and coordination of QA-related plans, systems and process would mostly suit universities with strong Faculties under the leadership of powerful Deans who have access to their own resources and can make decisions specific to programmes and resources of the Faculty. Such a decentralized organizational structure allows for non-uniform QA tools and templates that are suited to the discipline and fields of study of the Faculty, to the nature and profile of its Faculty members, and the resources that it disposes.

In such decentralized QA structures, it is likely that there would still be some need for university-wide cooperation and coordination, but this can be done thru ad-hoc teams, committees and task forces that are assembled for very specific QA-related activities. There may still be some minor units with dedicated personnel that are tasked to centralize some IQA efforts, but these are not full-blown offices and their responsibilities are mostly to coordinate and facilitate the separate and mostly independent QA efforts of the different Faculties.

As for the *QA-related policies*, many are expected to be university-wide, issued by such high-level offices, such as the Office of the VP for Academics or the VP for Research and Innovation, if not even the Office of the Provost, President or Rector. That said, there may still be more specific, possibly discipline-specific, policies and regulations that would only make sense for specific Faculties. Examples would be policies concerning those Faculties that are highly regulated by the profession/discipline such as the Faculty of Law, Faculty of Medicine (and other allied fields like Pharmacy, Nursing, Dentistry) and to some extent, even the Faculty of Engineering.

These policies and structures are designed to establish clear standards, procedures, and mechanisms for the design and implementation of study-programmes, research and innovation, as well as the community engagement of students and faculty members. The adoption of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) would be one such education policy that have major ramifications, not only in the design of study programmes, but even in teaching and learning, faculty training, learning infrastructure, student-centered services, and the like. Policies on undergraduate and graduate thesis, rules and procedures for student internships, internationalization-related policies, and coupling of research and teaching are other examples of high-level policies and programmes that are QA-related.

Component 2 : QA Systems and Processes

The policies related to education, research/innovation, and community engagement have to be supported by specific implementation mechanisms that the IQA Framework fleshes out as the subcomponents under *QA Systems and Processes*. These include, but are not limited to, the following areas of university operations:

- Student Quality & Support
- Teaching & Learning
- Research & Innovation
- Community Engagement
- Human Resources
- Budget & Finance
- Digitalization

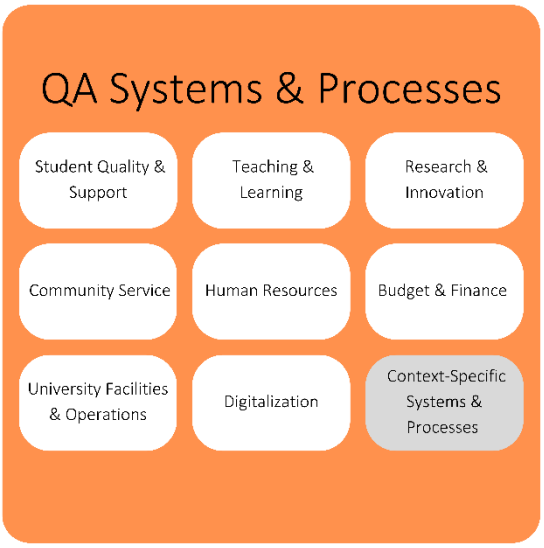

Figure 3. The sub-components of QA Systems and Processes

QA systems and processes related to *student quality and support* would refer to such systems that manage the recruitment, selection, admission, enrollment, as well as student advice and supervision throughout the students' stay in the university. They also include such student-centered services offered by the university such as scholarships, wellness and healthcare, socio-

cultural development, safety and security, and all other student-support services such as those geared towards preparing students for future career and employment.

QA systems and processes related to *teaching and learning* focus mainly on the design and delivery of the different study programmes. These would range from the design, implementation, and updating of curricula, to the quality of teaching and learning inside and outside the classrooms and laboratories, and the proper assessment of student performance. These systems and processes on teaching and learning are obviously closely tied to the general deployment, operation, and maintenance of *university facilities*, instructional and research laboratory equipment, and other learning infrastructure.

QA systems and processes also need to be established in order to make sure that the *academic staff*, and to a lesser extent but still quite important, the *support staff*, are able to properly deliver the study programmes in a manner that is efficient and effective. These include making sure that there are adequate and suitably trained human resources, and that their needs, welfare, and wellness are taken care of.

Aside from teaching and learning, many universities in the region have stepped up investments and have more recently established systems and processes to improve the quality and expand productivity of both faculty members and students in the area of *research and innovation*. At the same time, there have been more and more emphasis on *community engagement* on the part of students and members of the university staff. Research, innovation, and community engagement are generally seen to complement the teaching and learning of students towards their holistic education.

The *Digitalization* subcomponent under QA Systems and Processes refers to contemporary / current efforts, especially among the more mature universities, to harness the wide-range of capabilities offered by information and communications technology that would, for example, fully automate various systems and processes in the university. Digitalization of a university may offer an online access to lessons, IT-enabled academic transactions such as viewing of grades, online enlistment and enrollment, payment of tuition, and the like. More advanced forms would include digital media and AI in teaching and learning, and even virtual presence of teachers in remote sites. When ready, various QA systems and processes related to the digitalization efforts of the university may be established.

The education, research and community engagement pursuits of a university obviously need extensive human and physical resources which therefore need to be strategically budgeted for and financed. Depending on the nature and profile of the university, the financial resources may

mostly come from public funds. For private universities and some state-funded universities that need to vastly supplement the budget coming from government, the financial sustainability of the university operations must be ensured. Otherwise, delivery of the study programmes to students will be impaired. Indeed, the huge expenditure on campus facilities and infrastructure, major investments in research and innovation, and the human resource expenses must all be managed well. As such, in order for a university to function properly, QA systems and processes must be established for *budget and finance*.

Finally, just as for *QA Organization and Policies*, recognizing that universities may have specific policies that cater to their individual strategic environments and unique contexts, the AUNQA encourages institutions to include such other sub-components under *QA Systems and Processes* that may not fall under any of the sub-components listed above.

Component 3 : Data Analytics and Information Management

Once the QA systems and processes are in place and underway, there will be a need for data analytics and information management that would allow for monitoring the student quality and support for students prior to joining the university, while in the university, and after they leave the university. Various other relevant QA data and information that may not be directly related to the monitoring of student progress, need to be monitored as well.

The *Data Analytics and Information Management* component of the IQA Framework assembles a suite of IT-supported platforms for the collection, storage and management of the quantitative performance indicators. These key indicators may include, but are not limited to, data and information related to the following:

- Academic performance of students
- Research & innovation productivity
- Community engagement impact
- Adequacy of facilities & services
- HR capacity & capability
- Financial sustainability of university operations
- Stakeholder feedback

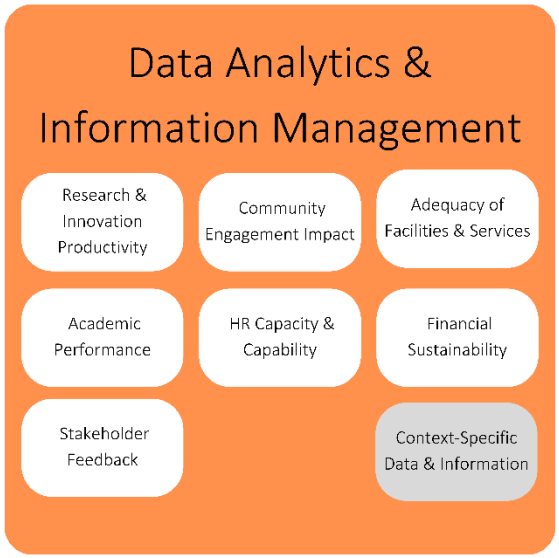

Figure 4. The sub-components of Data Analytics and Information Management

Data analytics and information management related to the *academic performance* of students is the most crucial in any IQA system. Even early-stage IQA systems of young, developing institutions would need a platform for monitoring student progress. But closely related to monitoring student progress are all data and information related to whether there is an *adequate* academic environment comprising of sufficient, well-maintained, suitable *campus facilities* and learning infrastructure, as well as all the related *student services* available on campus.

Another subcomponent (that is tightly coupled with data and information on student progress, campus facilities, and student services) relate to the *capacity and capability of human resources*, particularly the number and quality of the academic staff, as well as the personnel involved in providing student services. The monitoring of the capacity and capability of the academic staff would typically also include various data and information on *research and innovation productivity*, as well as the *impact* of various forms of community engagement of both students and faculty members.

Aligned with the Budget and Finance subcomponent under QA Systems and Processes, the IQA of mature universities may also need to monitor data and information to establish the *Financial Sustainability* of the university operations, given the unique context the university finds itself in.

Finally, there is a need to methodically gather all pertinent data and information that constitute relevant *stakeholder feedback*. Once again, depending on the readiness of the university, the IQA system of the university would need to at least consider the feedback from students, starting with

their inputs regarding teaching and learning, curriculum design, and student assessment. Feedback from the academic staff would be next, followed by feedback from alumni and employers.

Depending on the specific strategic university environment, there may be other important stakeholders whose feedback are critical for the continuous improvement of the quality of study programmes delivered by the university. And, in fact, there might be an entire unique subcomponent under *Data Analytics & Information Management* that may not fall under any of the sub-components listed above.

Finally, it must be noted that each of these components may have separate platforms for information management and analytics, or some of them may be consolidated in large portals and systems, according to the preferences and organizational structure of the university.

Component 4 : Evaluation and Enhancement

Evaluation and Enhancement as a component of the IQA Framework involve various sub-components aimed at using insights gained from the gathered data to make informed decisions towards enhancing the established QA systems and processes, all the way to the formulation and revision of policies related to education, research/innovation, and community engagement. These subcomponents include, but are not limited to, the following sub-components:

- Internal assessment
- Internal benchmarking
- External assessment and accreditation
- External benchmarking
- Stakeholder engagement
- Quality enhancement

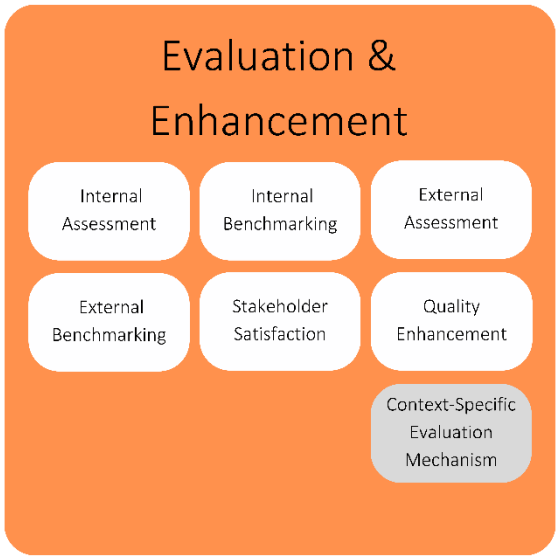

Figure 5. The sub-components of Evaluation and Enhancement

Internal assessment, as a subcomponent of Evaluation and Enhancement, encompasses activities like academic audits, programme reviews, and financial evaluations done internally by the university, which may be intrinsically motivated without any external pressure or government requirement. When regularly done, with the sole intent of making sure that study programmes are being delivered in the best possible way, internal assessment is a powerful tool that is fully under the control of a university; although this assumes that there are spare resources and available expertise to make good sense of the data and information collected and analyzed towards enhanced quality of study programmes.

Internal assessments may be complemented by *internal benchmarking*, which compares performance among different organizational units within the university. This would include direct comparisons of data and information that are specific to the different study programmes. Internal benchmarking aids in identifying gaps in the delivery of study programmes, which are easier to spot when there are negative trends and patterns on performance data over some period of time and viewed against the performance trends of other, similarly situated study programmes.

External assessment, which can be either sought by the university or is imposed on it by professional or national regulations, involves seeking outside perspectives and expertise through activities such as engaging external reviewers, obtaining disciplinal accreditation, and complying with national and international standards. External assessments would complement the internal assessments done by the university, and would serve to reinforce previous, internally generated findings. External assessments, being conducted by assessors who are not immersed in the day-

to-day operations of the university, or the specific study programmes, have the opportunity to analyze the data and information gathered using fresh, third party, often un-biased lenses.

External benchmarking would supplement the findings from internal benchmarking by making comparisons of the performance data with those from similarly situated universities (whether in the same country or not). External benchmarking, whenever possible, would also include comparative data from national, regional, and world rankings systems, as well as specific benchmarks relative to number and quality of academic staff, and performance of graduates in specific nationally-conducted board exams for specific professions, for example.

Evaluation and Enhancement, as a component of the IQA framework, also includes a sub-component on *Stakeholder engagement* that further strengthens the university's ability to evaluate QA data and information. Engaging stakeholders in the analysis and often the validation of data and information, particularly the patterns and trends that emerge from them, would offer opportunities for obtaining insights about how the academic programmes as well as the complementing learning infrastructure and support services can be improved.

At the framework level, the four basic IQA components operate in an iterative cycle towards the continuous improvement of the quality of the individual study programmes, as well as of the over-all university operations. At the individual QA system and process level, there are also opportunities for immediate and targeted *quality enhancement* resulting directly from the insights gained upon analyzing and evaluating QA data and information. This would involve the development of specific action plans to improve specific policies, systems, and processes based on assessment findings.

Finally, as for all the other components of the IQA framework, there might be very specific evaluation and quality enhancement mechanisms that are important for the university, given its unique context, that may not fall under the other subcomponents.

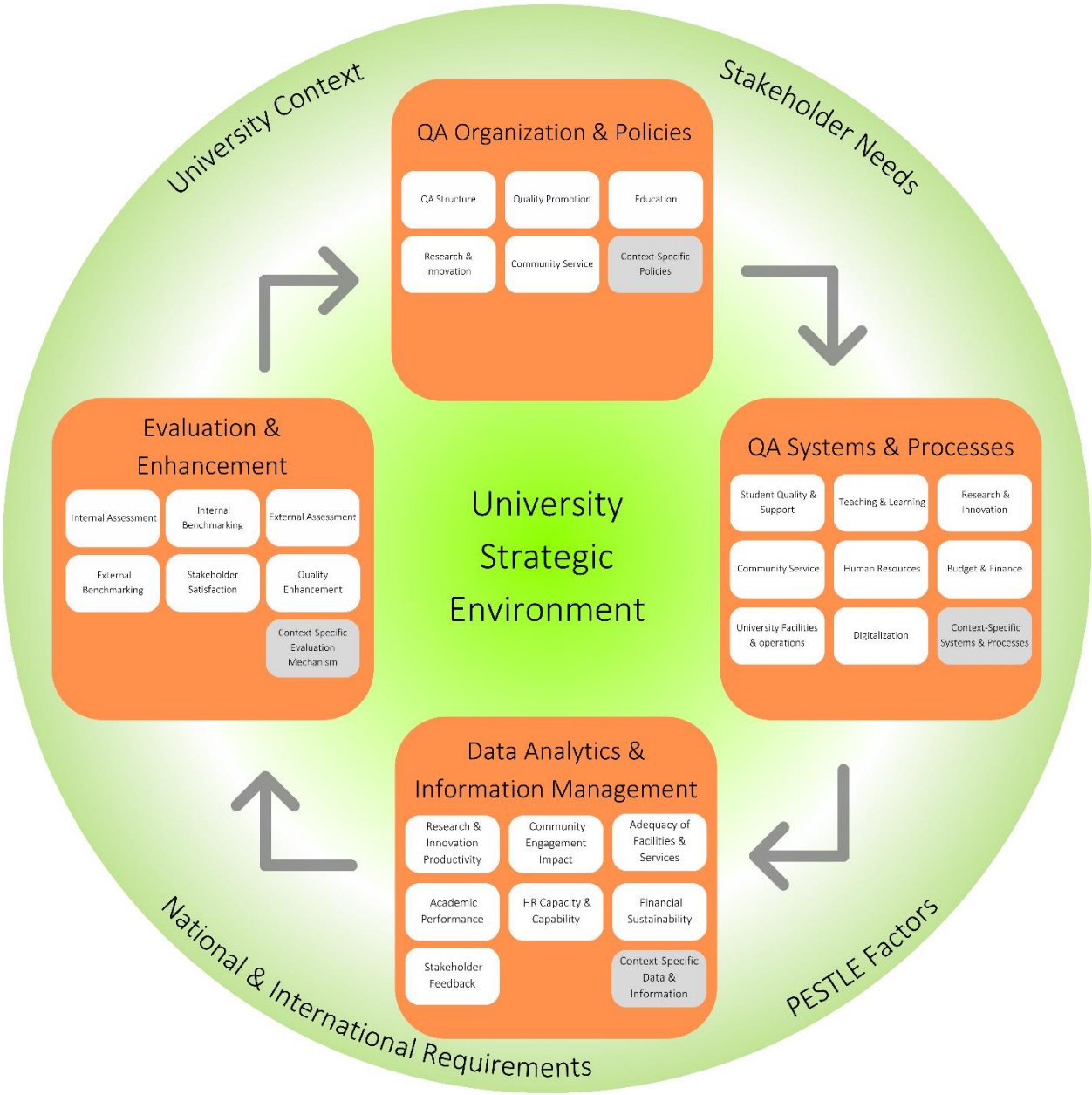

Figure 6. The components and respective sub-components of the AUN-QA IQA Framework

List of Reference Documents

1. AUN-QA Implementation Manual (Orange Book) - The Quality Model for an IQA system is around page 28.
2. AUN-QA Guide to Assessment at Institutional Level Version 3.0
3. AQAF IQA Framework
4. Report of the Redesigning of University IQA System (Version 1.0)
5. Meeting report from the 1st AUN-QA IQA Redesign Workshop by AUN-QA Secretariat
6. Presentation presented during the 1st AUN-QA IQA Redesign Workshop by AUN-QA Secretariat
7. Criterion 10 (Quality Enhancement) from AUN-QA Guide to Assessment at Programme level Version 3.0
8. Tier 3 Training Materials