HAQAA3 Agency Reviews

External Review Report
FULL AGENCY REVIEW

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, MALAWI
10 April 2025

EXPERT PANEL:

- Florence Kanze Lenga (Chair)
- Anneley Willemse (Secretary)
- Jeffy Mukora
- Kelvin Saka

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CHAPTER 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of the external review of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Malawi, conducted under the third phase of the Harmonisation, Accreditation, and Quality Assurance in African Higher Education Initiative (HAQAA3). The review was coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) on behalf of the HAQAA3 initiative. Among others, the initiative offers external reviews, consultancy visits and follow-up visits for quality assurance agencies (QAAs) for higher education in Africa. The main aim of the HAQAA3 agency reviews is to support the development of QAAs in line with the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) and to enhance the implementation of external quality assurance (EQA), which includes an enhancement-led review to evaluate the extent to which the agency meets the expectations of the ASG-QA. Hence, the review was carried out in accordance with the ASG-QA and followed a structured methodology that included a self-assessment report (SAR) analysis, document review, site visits, and stakeholder interviews. The objective was to assess the NCHE's compliance with the ASG-QA and to provide recommendations for enhancing its EQA mechanisms. The site visit took place from 11th-13th December 2024, with the review panel engaging NCHE leadership, higher education institutions (HEIs), quality assurance (QA) officers, students, employers, and other key stakeholders.

Established under the NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011, the NCHE is the sole national body responsible for higher education regulation, accreditation, and QA in Malawi. Its mission is to promote quality, accessible, relevant, and inclusive higher education in line with national and international best practices. The Agency oversees institutional and programme accreditation, conducts quality audits, facilitates student selection for public universities, and ensures compliance with minimum standards for HEIs. Through these activities, the NCHE plays a pivotal role in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and accountability in Malawi's higher education sector.

The review panel found that the NCHE is legally recognised, operates with a well-defined governance structure, and has established transparent accreditation and audit procedures. Its minimum standards for HEIs, developed through benchmarking with regional agencies in Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and Nigeria, align with the ASG-QA. Furthermore, the NCHE has developed guidelines for Open and Distance Learning (ODeL), bridging programmes, and internal quality assurance (IQA) units within HEIs. However, some standards have not been updated since their adoption in 2015, necessitating a review to incorporate emerging trends in higher education.

A key strength of the NCHE is its commitment to stakeholder engagement, with active involvement of universities, professional bodies, and government entities in developing QA frameworks. Capacity-building workshops are conducted for HEIs to strengthen their IQA systems, and HEIs generally appreciate the NCHE's role in guiding quality enhancement efforts. However, the monitoring of IQA effectiveness remains inconsistent, and follow-up mechanisms for implementing improvement plans require reinforcement.

While evaluation processes are clearly defined and published, certain areas require improvement. The review panel observed overlaps between institutional audits and the registration and accreditation processes for private HEIs, potentially leading to redundancy and evaluation fatigue. Additionally, SARs are not provided to review panels well in advance, limiting their ability to adequately prepare for assessments. The inclusion of students and international

experts in external review panels is currently lacking, which could enhance the credibility and diversity of assessment outcomes.

The NCHE upholds ethical governance and conflict-of-interest policies, ensuring impartiality in accreditation decisions. The recent practice of allowing HEIs to review and approve expert panels before site visits is a positive step in enhancing transparency. However, the NCHE's operational independence is constrained by financial and staffing limitations, affecting its ability to conduct regular quality audits and follow-ups on accreditation recommendations.

Additionally, the review examined NCHE's complaints and appeals mechanisms. The absence of formal, written appeals procedures was noted as a significant gap. While institutions can seek clarification on accreditation decisions, there is no structured mechanism for formal appeals. The review panel recommends that the NCHE finalises and disseminates its draft Complaints and Appeals Guidelines to enhance institutional confidence in its decisions and promote accountability. Furthermore, HEIs expressed concerns over response timelines to complaints, suggesting the need for clearer guidelines on complaint resolution procedures.

Key recommendations include updating minimum standards to reflect evolving higher education dynamics, enhancing monitoring mechanisms for IQA units within HEIs, reducing redundancy between institutional audits and accreditation processes, providing SARs to review panels in advance for thorough preparation, including students and international experts in review teams, strengthening post-accreditation follow-ups and institutional support and finalising and implementing structured complaints and appeals procedures to improve institutional confidence in accreditation decisions.

The review panel has reached the following judgements (Table 1.1) about the NCHE's compliance with the ASG-QA:

Table 1.1: Summary of Judgements

Standard	Description	Judgement
Part B 1	Objectives of EQA and consideration for IQA	Compliant
Part B 2	Designing EQA mechanisms fit-for-purpose	Compliant
Part B 3	Implementation processes of EQA	Partially compliant
Part B 4	Independence of evaluation	Partially compliant
Part B 5	Decision and reporting of EQA Outcomes	Partially compliant
Part B 6	Periodic review of institutions and programmes	Compliant
Part B 7	Complaints and appeals	Non-compliant
Part C 1	Legal status	Compliant
Part C 2	Vision and mission statement	Compliant
Part C 3	Governance and management	Compliant
Part C 4	Independence of QAA	Compliant
Part C 5	Policies, processes and activities	Compliant
Part C 6	Internal Quality Assurance	Partially compliant
Part C 7	Financial and human resources	Partially compliant
Part C 8	Benchmarking, networking and collaboration	Compliant
Part C 9	Periodic review of QAAs	Compliant

The review panel finds the NCHE **substantially compliant** with the ASG-QA but identifies areas requiring further action. The Council demonstrates a strong foundation for QA leadership in Malawi's higher education sector. By addressing the recommendations outlined in this report, particularly in the areas of IQA, monitoring, stakeholder inclusion, and appeals processes, the NCHE can further enhance its role in safeguarding academic standards, promoting innovation, and ensuring international recognition of Malawian qualifications.

CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION

AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW EXERCISE

The NCHE signed an agreement with the HAQAA3 initiative to subject itself to the external review carried out by an independent panel of experts, contracted by ENQA on behalf of the HAQAA3 initiative. This report, therefore, analyses the compliance of the NCHE-Malawi with Part B and Part C of the ASG-QA, and identifies areas for improvement. The review results in a compliance judgement on the Agency's compliance with the ASG-QA.

The review provided an opportunity for the NCHE to benchmark its EQA practices against international best practices and enhance its role in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education in Malawi. The review also sought to promote transparency and accountability in the NCHE's processes while strengthening institutional trust and stakeholder engagement.

The findings from this review are expected to inform the NCHE's strategic direction, ensuring that it aligns with regional and global trends in QA in higher education. Additionally, the review serves as a preparatory step for the NCHE to enhance its international credibility and recognition.

Panel composition

The external review panel comprised four members drawn from different African countries, on the grounds of their expertise in QA in higher education, governance, and student representation, namely:

1. Florence Kanze Lenga (Chair), formerly from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya (Retired in June 2024).
2. Anneley Willemse (Secretary), Senior Programme Quality Assurance Coordinator, Namibia University of Science and Technology, Namibia.
3. Jeffy Mukora (Panel member), National Council for Evaluation of Quality in Higher Education, Mozambique.
4. Kelvin Saka (Panel member), Student at University of Professional Studies, Accra-Ghana. (Nominated by The All-Africa Students Union).

This review panel composition ensured a balanced review, incorporating institutional, national, and regional perspectives while also including the student voice in the evaluation process. The review was coordinated by Luis Miranda, Project Officer at ENQA, and the process was observed by Adewale Olusegun Obadina, Project Officer for Quality Assurance and Accreditation, at the Association of African Universities.

Introduction of NCHE-Malawi

The NCHE is the sole regulatory body overseeing HEIs in Malawi. Established under the NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011, the Council began its operations in 2014. The NCHE is mandated to regulate, register, and accredit both public and private HEIs. Public HEIs are only required to be accredited by the NCHE, as they are established through their respective Acts of Parliament (universities). The NCHE also conducts quality audits, oversees programme accreditation, coordinates student

selection into public universities, and advises the Minister of Education on higher education matters.

The NCHE commenced its accreditation assessments in 2016, marking the start of its first accreditation phase. Since then, it has conducted a series of registration and accreditation evaluations. According to Section 20 of its Act, the NCHE oversees the registration of private HEIs, granting them the authority to operate once they meet the minimum standards established by the Council. The registration process begins with provisional registration and final registration is granted only after an inspection confirms that the institution meets the NCHE's minimum standards. Section 28 of the NCHE Act mandates the accreditation of HEIs, which signifies that an institution or its programmes fulfil the required standards set by the NCHE. This process involves a comprehensive evaluation of the institution's physical, human, financial, and educational resources to ensure compliance with both national and international standards. Accreditation guarantees that qualifications awarded by these institutions are recognised as equivalent to those from other accredited institutions in Malawi and abroad. The NCHE, furthermore, conducts ad hoc and regular programme and institutional quality audits to ensure compliance with the QA policies, standards and procedures. It also monitors and evaluates the implementation of IQA mechanisms in HEIs. Additionally, the NCHE manages the verification and recognition of qualifications. This process ensures that qualifications meet legal standards and may involve rigorous evaluation. Applicants must submit relevant documents, including certificates, transcripts, and theses; any forged documents will lead to disqualification.

As of 2024, the NCHE oversees a total of 52 registered universities and colleges, ensuring compliance with minimum quality standards for higher education. The Agency also collaborates with professional bodies and international agencies to maintain academic integrity and enhance the global recognition of Malawian qualifications. In recent years, the NCHE has expanded its scope to include QA guidelines for ODeL, bridging programmes, and IQA units within HEIs.

Higher education system in Malawi

The higher education system in Malawi comprises both public and private HEIs, including universities, colleges, and technical colleges. These institutions offer a variety of undergraduate, postgraduate, diploma, and certificate programmes across different disciplines. The primary objective of the higher education system is to produce skilled professionals, promote research, and contribute to national development. The NCHE has jurisdiction over universities and colleges, but not over technical colleges. Malawi has 19 public HEIs of which six are public universities that operate under their respective governing Act or legislative provisions. Out of these, 13 are colleges owned by different government ministries and departments. The public universities include University of Malawi, Mzuzu University, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi University of Science and Technology, Kamuzu University of Health Sciences, and Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences. These institutions are government-funded and offer programmes across diverse disciplines such as science, education, agriculture, engineering, and the humanities. Malawi has 33 private HEIs, consisting of faith-based institutions and those owned by individual investors or shareholders, of which two are tuition providers and one is provisionally registered. In addition to the 52 HEIs, Malawi has 20 technical colleges and vocational training institutions whose aim is to provide practical skills to students in fields such as bricklaying, carpentry, metalwork, etc. The Technical Education,

Vocational, and Entrepreneurship Training Authority is responsible for assuring the quality of vocational education in Malawi. Table 2.1 provides a summary of registered and accredited HEIs in Malawi as of October 2024.

Table 2.1: Summary of Registration and Accreditation Status of HEIs in Malawi

Category	Number of provisionally registered HEIs	Number of registered HEIs	Number of tuition providers	Number of accredited HEIs	Total
Public HEIs	NA	*11	0	8	19
Private HEIs	1	7	2	23	33
Total	**1**	**18**	**2**	**31**	**52**

Source: SAR (List of Registered and Accredited HEIs in Malawi, p. 5), SAR (Table 3.1, p. 6)

* This figure excludes the six public universities established by Acts of Parliament.

Period of the exercise

The exercise started with the signing of the terms of reference (ToR) between the NCHE and HAQAA3 on 19th March 2024 and ended with the final external review report (ERR) sent to the NCHE on 7th April 2025. The structured timeline of the review process is described in detail in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The review panel received the NCHE's SAR on 6th November 2024. Each panel member perused the SAR in preparation of the briefing meeting that was scheduled for 14th November 2024 facilitated by the coordinator. Among others, the briefing meeting covered a preliminary discussion by the panel members on the first impressions of the SAR. The panel members also identified further documents to be requested from the NCHE, namely: IQA policy of the Agency; specific roles of the chair, panel members and Secretariat during NCHE's reviews; sample signed bilateral and/or multilateral agreements; signed contract of external financial auditor, among others, and discussed the preparation of the mapping grid as well as the site visit schedule. The Secretary of the review panel sent the draft site visit schedule to the coordinator on 20th November 2024 for input and thereafter to the NCHE contact person on 22nd November 2024 for input and consideration. Furthermore, an online clarifications meeting took place between the panel and a few staff members of the NCHE on 25th November 2024 where the Agency presented an overview of the higher education system in Malawi to provide context to the experts, and the panel sought clarification regarding the functioning of the system and some issues in the SAR.

The review panel also held two meetings prior to the site visit on 2nd and 6th December 2024, respectively, to discuss the list of evidence files compiled by the panel members and the populated mapping grid. The meetings were facilitated by the chair of the review panel with the coordinator in attendance to provide guidance and further clarifications on the issues discussed.

The thee-day site visit took place from 11th-13th December 2024, attended in person by three panel members and the observer, while one of the reviewers participated online. The site visit included interviews conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders, including the NCHE leadership, university administrators, faculty members, students, employers, and representatives from professional bodies. The panel also engaged in further examination of additional documents onsite, including inspection of the facilities. An exit report was orally given to the NCHE staff on the last day of the site visit. Based on the SAR, studying of evidence documents and information collected during the interviews, the panel members drafted the ERR between January-February 2025. Each panel member wrote a part of the report, and the various write-ups were consolidated by the secretary. A meeting was held on 4th February 2025 for the panel members to review the report and agree on its contents. The meeting was organised by the coordinator who was in attendance together with the AAU observer. The final report was edited and finalised by the secretary. The draft report was submitted to the coordinator on 11th February 2025 for screening. The draft ERR was sent to the NCHE for factual accuracy on 12th March 2025 and the final ERR was sent to HAQAA3 on 31st March 2025 that shared it with the NCHE on 10th April 2025.

There was mutual agreement among the review panel members on all decisions in the ERR. The information in the SAR, and insights gathered during the site visit, combined with the documentary evidence provided by the NCHE, form the basis of this report's findings and recommendations. The review panel acknowledges the full cooperation of the NCHE and its stakeholders throughout the review process.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND JUDGEMENTS

This chapter presents the observations and conclusions based on critical analyses of the various performance indicators of the standards in Part B and Part C during the review exercise.

PART B: STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

STANDARD 1. OBJECTIVES OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND CONSIDERATION FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

> **Standard: EQA shall ensure that the HEI has clearly articulated vision and mission statements, and it shall help the institution ensure the effectiveness of its IQA mechanisms, providing an additional instrument for assessing institutional quality.**

Evidence

The SAR indicates that the NCHE requires HEIs to have a clearly defined, articulated, and publicly displayed vision, mission and objectives in accordance with the Agency's quality standards (SAR, Interview with the Chief Executive Officer [CEO] and Chairperson of the Board). Standard 1.1 of the Minimum Standards states that "HEIs shall have a vision, mission, core values and objective statements. The vision statement shall express the long-term plan of the institution in terms that are readily understandable by a range of stakeholders" (Minimum Standards for Higher Education Institutions in Malawi, October 2015, p. 16). Additionally, HEIs use the standards to guide them in conducting self-assessments (which was confirmed during the interview with the Heads of some reviewed HEIs) and to develop improvement plans to achieve improved delivery of quality education at both operational and academic levels.

The NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011, Part III section 15 and Part VII sections 27-28, outlines the mandate of the Agency with respect to the accreditation of HEIs and assessment of institutional quality compliance. The Act requires that the NCHE should recommend to the Minister IQA standards for the accreditation of HEIs, which include standards for teaching and learning; physical, human and financial resources; infrastructure; curricular design; and libraries and learning resource centres. Other important standards such as research, community service, public accountability; quality enhancement and having in place a QA policy, which HEIs should meet for self-improvement of their IQA, as proposed in Part A of the ASG-QA, are covered in the NCHE's assessment tool for the accreditation of HEIs, Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework (HEQAF) for Malawi, October 2019, and the Minimum Standards. Inclusion of these standards in the NCHE frameworks and guidelines was confirmed during the interviews with the CEO and Chairperson of the Board and Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool. Also included in the Minimum Standards are quality criteria for different programme offering types, e.g., Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees. This proves that the NCHE supports HEIs' responsibility for their own QA.

One of the functions of the NCHE, according to its Act, is to design and recommend an institutional QA system for higher education (Interview with Heads of some Reviewed HEIs). Pursuant to this directive, the NCHE has developed the HEQAF and detailed guidelines to assist HEIs in the establishment of IQA structures and procedures (HEQAF, pp. 1-2, 39-40, 46-50, 139;

Guidelines for the Establishment and Strengthening of Internal Quality Assurance Units in HEIs; Interviews with CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and Secretariat Staff in charge of EQA Activities). Furthermore, the QA Officers of HEIs attested that the NCHE provides tremendous support to institutions in establishing IQA units and that the guidelines enable them to have stronger IQA units.

In addition to this, the Agency has developed and implemented various programme accreditation and institutional audit assessment tools in aid of HEIs to continuously improve their academic offerings and services. They include a template for the Charter for HEIs, assessment tools for the accreditation of face-to-face and ODeL programmes as well as assessment tools for the accreditation of face-to-face and ODeL HEIs. Various documents provided to the review panel as evidence on the use of some of these tools include an Audit Report of Skyway University, dated May 2024, improvement plan template, and an improvement plan for the accreditation of Daeyang University, dated 30 September 2024.

To ensure that HEIs carry out their IQA activities effectively and efficiently, the NCHE conducts capacity building workshops for the institutions on IQA to ensure that they understand QA principles and processes among other key characteristics (Training Report of ODeL QA Managers and Coordinators in IQA, Interview with QA Officers of HEIs).

Analysis

The panel notes that the NCHE's assessment tools for QA are aligned to the set Minimum Standards for higher education. The HEIs mainstream their vision, mission and core values into the programmes that they offer. These facets are considered by the institutions during programme design and development and are evaluated during the programme accreditation process. For example, a science and technology-oriented university does not offer a humanity-based programme.

Interactions with different groups of interviewees during the site visit confirmed that the HEIs in Malawi have structured IQA units integrated into the governance structures of the universities. The review panel noted the institutions' appreciation for the support the NCHE provides them in the establishment of IQA units and is encouraging the Agency to continue being an efficient support system to HEIs in improving their IQA. The heads/coordinators of these units are trained by the NCHE staff on aspects of QA and take lead in the processes of institutional and programme accreditation in the institutions prior to and after the Agency's quality assessment visits, such as institutional self-assessment based on the Minimum Standards and the HEQAF. The setting up of IQA units by the HEIs is guided by the guidelines developed by the NCHE for their establishment, and a timeframe for their establishment is given as per the status of the institution. However, the NCHE has not been monitoring compliance of the IQA units in the HEIs with the set guidelines, with reference to the IQA policies and IQA structures that the institutions have put up to coordinate EQA activities. The effectiveness of the IQA units and mechanisms in the HEIs cannot therefore be ascertained.

The review panel confirmed through the interview with the representatives of HEIs' QA officers that the NCHE regularly conducts training workshops for capacity building on the use of EQA tools and developed templates. The panel was encouraged to note the professional nature and confidence of the QA officers from the HEIs and reviewers that were interviewed. The capacity

building workshops had been enriching and contributed to HEIs taking responsibility for their own QA.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE assists HEIs to mainstream their vision and mission statements in the academic programmes that they offer.
2. The NCHE makes concerted efforts to support HEIs in establishing IQA units and conducting capacity building workshops to strengthen the human resources in the institutions on IQA aspects.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the IQA units in the HEIs to ensure that a quality culture is truly entrenched in the institutions.

STANDARD 2. DESIGNING EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS FIT-FOR-PURPOSE

Standard: Standards, guidelines and processes for EQA shall be designed to be fit-for-purpose, defined to achieve the intended aims and objectives of EQA, and to strengthen IQA systems at institutions.

Evidence

The NCHE is mandated to accredit both public and private HEIs (NCHE Act, Part III section 15). This legislation describes accreditation as the process of recognising the programmes offered by HEIs in accordance with the QA standards for institutions and the evaluation of HEIs. The purpose of accreditation, as explained in the SAR, is to support HEIs in their continuous improvement processes, ensuring that both institutions and their academic programmes maintain high standards of quality. Furthermore, section 29 of the Act (p. 19) stipulates that accredited programmes are comparable and of equivalent merit to similar qualifications awarded nationally and internationally. To increase acceptability of the Minimum Standards among HEIs, they have been benchmarked against other established QAAs such as those in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa (Report on Benchmarking Visit to Kenya and South Africa, Interviews with CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and the SAR Team). This has been done to ensure that the developed frameworks, standards and methodologies in use in the country reflect good practices and maintain relevance, nationally and internationally. However, the review panel noted with concern that the Minimum Standards have not been reviewed since they were developed in 2015, but the Senior Management Team, during their interview, indicated that the standards will be reviewed in 2026.

To effectively conduct programme and institutional accreditation, the HEQAF specifies clear standards and criteria for both programme accreditation (HEQAF, p. 82) and institutional audits (HEQAF, p. 110). In addition, the review panel examined other relevant complementary

guidelines, regulations and assessment tools pertaining to this standard that the NCHE uses in conducting programme accreditation and institutional audits, i.e.: (a) Standards and Guidelines for the Delivery of ODeL Programmes; (b) Accreditation Regulations for HEIs (Revised 2023); (c) Standard Operating Procedures for Quality Audits in HEIs (June, 2024); (d) Assessment Tool for the Registration and Accreditation of HEIs; (e) Assessment Tool for the Registration and Accreditation of Face-to-Face Programmes; and (f) Assessment Tool for the Registration and Accreditation of ODeL Programmes and ODeL HEIs. The Minimum Standards and the standards and criteria for programme accreditation and institutional audits, together with all the additional complementary assessment tools, provide clear aims and objectives, processes and outcomes, including the development of improvement plans, for the assessments carried out by the NCHE.

The NCHE has an additional function, which is the registration of private HEIs. However, through the studying of the HEQAF, the review panel observed an overlap between the standards and criteria for institutional audits (HEQAF, p. 110) and the same for the registration and accreditation for private HEIs (HEQAF, p. 66). The question that comes to mind is that if private HEIs must comply with accreditation standards already during the registration process, while they will be assessed again against most of the same standards during an audit (i.e., vision, mission and strategic planning; quality management; financial viability and management; human resources; programme development, delivery and evaluation; assessment and moderation; research; corporate social responsibility), does this not show a duplication of efforts for both the NCHE and the institutions, because it may result in the same type of information being provided for two different types of assessments that could cause evaluation fatigue for the concerned institutions. In the interview with the Ministry's Representatives, they stated that "there is some conflict of interest in terms of registration" and that they "wish that NCHE only does accreditation".

In line with good practices in QA in higher education, the NCHE engages stakeholders in the development of its EQA tools and processes. The development of the tools and processes involves HEIs, professional bodies and industry. The timing for this is dependent on the foreseen need. An example is the recent development of standards and guidelines for delivery of ODeL programmes, after the COVID 19 experience. The process involved identification of ODeL experts from HEIs who through various fora shared their expertise and experiences. These were documented and validated through stakeholder meetings. Thereafter the developed tool was approved by the Council and disseminated for use by the HEIs (NCHE Standards and Guidelines for the Delivery of ODeL Programmes, September 2023). It is thus important for the Agency not to take the sole responsibility for developing EQA tools, guidelines and processes, but to involve HEIs and professional bodies to solicit their input and to validate these tools in various stakeholders' fora (SAR). Stakeholder consultations ensure fairness, contextual relevance, fitness-for-purpose; increase HEIs' buy-in in the various QA tools; and offers them and other relevant bodies an opportunity to understand the mechanisms and procedures of QA and their role viz a viz the EQA principles. According to the NCHE, "HEIs need to own the tools and guidelines as users" (Interview with Staff in charge of EQA Activities). Examples of evidence of stakeholder consultations are a Report on Engagement Meetings with Vice-chancellors and Registrars of HEIs, Client Satisfaction Survey Report, and NCHE's Newsletter Vol. 3, Issue 1, October 2023.

Analysis

The review panel confirms that the NCHE's legislative law clearly mandates it to conduct programme accreditation and institutional audits at public and private HEIs, considering both face-to-face and ODeL modalities of HEI provision. The NCHE's evaluation principles and processes are based on its Act of parliament, which provides an articulated description of the concept of accreditation that guided the Agency in a systematic way to develop Minimum Standards and complementary assessment tools for the effective implementation of the Act. The final product of the external evaluations is registration of private HEIs, and accreditation decisions of institutions and or academic programmes, with the HEIs submitting improvement plans on recommendations given by the EQA. This was confirmed by a sample of minutes of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) of 8th and 9th June 2021, where recommendations to the Council for approval were made for: (a) The process for registration of private HEIs, (b) Application form, (c) Assessment form for registration of private HEIs, (d) the accreditation of programmes with conditions; other programmes not recommended for accreditation; and (e) the accreditation of the HEI, mentioned in the report, with conditions. In the same meetings, the QAAC resolved that the improvement plan for the institutional accreditation for the HEI considered, be presented with clearly defined actions with timelines ensuring that every process was evidence-based. Based on the NCHE's legislation, the EQA principles, processes and tools examined, and discussions held with the various parties during the visit, the panel attests that the evaluation processes are fit-for-purpose. The evaluations provide the evidence to some extent to demonstrate whether the HEIs meet set quality requirements and useful recommendations for quality improvement.

Observations by the review panel from the meetings held with interviewees (representatives of HEIs, Reviewers, and Professional Bodies) indicate that the Agency has made a commendable effort to ensure involvement of stakeholders as its partners in the development and continuous improvement of its evaluation tools (e.g., the ODeL tools). However, the review panel has noted that there is little progress in the monitoring of the improvement plans in the HEIs. Also, the Minimum Standards in use have not been reviewed since their development in 2015, and they are not robust enough as per the reviewers' interactions with the review panel. Some of the standards are not measurable and/or quantifiable. The review panel suggests a review of the standards and refinement of the quality indicators to enhance the work of the reviewers in making objective decisions.

Furthermore, the review panel noted the overlaps between the standards and criteria for institutional audits and those for the registration and accreditation for private HEIs and suggests that the criteria be reviewed to remove any redundant evaluation standards and processes.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE has established EQA mechanisms, guidelines and tools for assessing the quality of HEIs in the country.
2. The NCHE's stakeholders are involved as partners in the development and continuous improvement of its evaluation tools.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should undertake continuous follow-ups of the HEIs to ensure that there is implementation of the improvement plans developed by the institutions, for mainstreaming a continuous quality culture into the HEIs. This could include periodic progress reviews, targeted feedback sessions, and site visits to evaluate corrective actions.

Suggestions for improvement

1. The NCHE may consider reviewing the standards and criteria for institutional audits and those for the registration and accreditation for private HEIs to eliminate any unnecessary duplications and possible evaluation fatigue for private HEIs.

2. The NCHE should review the quality indicators of its evaluation tools to make them measurable and or quantifiable to eliminate unnecessary bias by reviewers of HEIs and programmes during the accreditation and quality audit processes. This will enhance transparency, fairness, and objectivity in the decision-making process of the Council.

STANDARD 3. IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

> **Standard: The standards, processes, and procedures for EQA shall be pre-defined, reliable, published, and consistently implemented for purposes of accountability.**

Evidence

The SAR indicates that the NCHE's EQA tools and processes are benchmarked against regional and global frameworks, as indicated in Part B S2, to ensure their trustworthiness. This commitment to global standards is reflected in the Minimum Standards, each broken down into indicators to ensure consistency and accountability. The standards are disseminated to HEIs (Interview with QA Officers) and published on the NCHE's website (Website). The standards and features of the processes for the EQA of higher education are documented in the HEQAF – Guidelines for Self-Review of HEIs (p. 139) – and the Accreditation Regulations for HEIs (p. 8). They are also published on the NCHE website. As indicated in the SAR, and confirmed by the documents examined (in particular, the Accreditation Evaluation Framework that describes in detail the steps in the accreditation process) and the stakeholders interviewed during the site visit (Interview with Senior Management Team), the NCHE's evaluation process is guided by the following steps: submission of an application for evaluation by the HEI; development and submission of the SAR; assessment by external peer reviewers, including a site visit entailing interviews with various stakeholder groups as per a pre-approved schedule; exit meeting to present the highlights (oral report) of the assessment; production of a draft report; checking of factual errors by the institution that has been assessed or whose programme has been assessed, including a response by the institution; final report including a proposal for a decision on the outcome; decision on accreditation by the Council; publication of the accreditation decision on the NCHE's website; and a follow-up on the accreditation recommendations after the submission of an improvement plan.

Evidence documents studied by the review panel, which confirm the steps followed in the external evaluation process, include samples of site visit schedules (including an entry meeting;

document reviews; interviews with students, lecturers, management team; campus tour; and an exit meeting). The review panel observed a consistency between the site visit schedules in terms of the agenda for the site visits but feels that key role players such as employers / industry, alumni, support staff – academic as well as administrative – are omitted, while these stakeholders could provide valuable inputs into the assessment process. Other pieces of evidence included a SAR template; attendance lists for staff and students' interviews; exit meeting to provide preliminary feedback; preliminary external review ERR; letter to HEI on accreditation outcome and final audit report; improvement plan template and sample improvement plan; and post-accreditation evaluation form for HEIs.

While the review panel is generally satisfied that the NCHE has put in place a robust, reliable and well-respected EQA system and procedures, the team found that the reviewers are only provided with the "SAR and the evidence documents on the day when the review starts" (Interview with Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). The review panel was further informed that the SAR cannot be used "as a basis for assessment because it is just a reference document, as the HEIs had not matured in understanding the standards yet. Hence, reviewers use the evidence and what is on the ground to assess the programme/institution" (Session for clarification of pending issues).

In terms of follow-ups on the implementation of accreditation recommendations, the review panel learnt that due to staff shortages, the NCHE does not get time to make regular follow-ups, but some spot checks are performed (Interview with QA Officers of HEIs).

Analysis

The NCHE has put in place a robust, reliable and well-respected EQA system, consisting of predefined standards, processes and procedures that are available on its website. The NCHE has well established evaluation processes for programme accreditation and institutional audits as portrayed by the six-stage accreditation approach outlined in this standard, and the Agency has appropriate instruments for ensuring consistency in carrying out its assessment processes.

According to the standards outlined in the HEQAF, the involvement of industry in curriculum design as well as work placements or internships are key indicators for the accreditation of HEIs, but the review panel found that employers, among others, are not included in the assessment processes of the NCHE. Industry representatives could add value to the assessment and, thus, the review panel suggests that the NCHE includes a session for employers in its site visit schedule for programme accreditation, especially those employing graduates.

In line with good EQA practices, Part B S3 of the ASG-QA emphasises that EQA is conducted on the basis of the SAR submitted by the institution that is audited or whose programme is accredited, but although HEIs are required to produce a SAR with related evidence documents for assessments, the NCHE regards it secondary to the exercise that may create doubts about the credibility of the EQA processes applied by the NCHE. A well-articulated SAR, provided to the reviewers well in advance together with relevant evidence documents, would allow reviewers to gain insights into the confidence of QAAs in carrying out EQA activities and processes and to verify the information provided in the SAR with the evidence and information gathered through the interviews with various stakeholder groups to make reliable judgements.

The processes lead to the accreditation decisions being published and the consequences are managed through a regular series of consistent follow-up procedures. Regular follow-ups on the

implementation of accreditation recommendations are an essential function of the NCHE. However, due to staff shortages, the Agency does not get time to make regular follow-ups although some spot-checks are performed.

Conclusion

Partially compliant

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should avail the SAR, and related evidence documents to review panels at least one week in advance of site visits to allow reviewers to prepare sufficiently for EQA exercises.

Suggestions for improvement

1. The NCHE should include an interview session with representatives from the industry/ employers in its site visit schedule for programme accreditation.

STANDARD 4. INDEPENDENCE OF EVALUATION

> **Standard: EQA shall be carried out by panels of external experts drawn from a wide range of expertise and experience.**

Evidence

According to the SAR and the Accreditation Evaluation Framework, external review panels, comprising subject experts; administrators; QA and industry experts; as well as experts in library, infrastructure and student support services, are appointed to conduct programme accreditation and institutional audits at HEIs. Professional experts are included in review panels when programmes in a regulated profession are assessed, and for institutional audits, an architect is included on the panel to give input on the infrastructure (Interview with Senior Management). While international experts were included in review panels earlier, i.e. 2016-2018, they are currently excluded because of reasons beyond the NCHE's control, i.e. "economic challenges such as scarcity of foreign exchange" (SAR, p. 42). The latter was confirmed by NCHE's Senior Management. In addition, students are not included in review panels (SAR, Online clarification meeting) because the HEQAF does not make provision for it as noted during the interview with the Senior Management. However, there was consensus among the stakeholders that it would be beneficial to include students on review panels to accommodate good practices and include the students' voice provided that they are sufficiently trained (Interviews with Senior Management, Heads of some reviewed HEIs, Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). In addition, the QA Officers of HEIs informed the review panel that the pending Higher Education Bill makes provision for the inclusion of students on review panels. The Higher Education Bill makes provision for amendments to the NCHE Act to address the gaps in the Agency's legislative framework that compromise the NCHE to carry out its mandate efficiently and effectively (Interviews with the CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and Ministry representatives). The Bill was submitted to the Ministry of Education in 2020-2021 for approval, but some delays were experienced. However, some consultations are now underway, and it is expected that the Minister of Education will table the Higher Education Bill in parliament by March 2025.

Reviewers are sourced through a public call for applications (Accreditation Regulations, Interview with Senior Management) or a pool of reviewers from which the NCHE selects and writes to the reviewers to request their participation in scheduled assessments (Interview with Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). According to the SAR and the Accreditation Evaluation Framework, reviewers must hold at minimum a Master's degree and at least five years of working experience in their relevant fields and in higher education. Reference about a database of reviewers is made on the NCHE's website, in the Accreditation Evaluation Framework, the Code of Conduct and the Work Ethics for Reviewers, and the Senior Management informed the external review panel about a Reviewers Management Information System (i.e. an excel spread sheet) that was recently developed, but evidence of such could not be found.

According to the SAR, reviewers are subject to orientation and training on the NCHE's QA system and procedures prior to commencing with external reviews. However, the evidence (Website, ODeL Reviewers' Training Report) showed that workshops were intended to train staff at HEIs on the NCHE's ODeL framework, in particular, and general issues in IQA and EQA, standards for registration and accreditation of HEIs and programmes, curriculum development and QA frameworks, amongst other. Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool confirmed that training is conducted for the reviewers before every site visit; however, they emphasised that more focus must be given to the induction of reviewers because sometimes they lack understanding of the tools and standards as well as the different purposes of reviews (Interviews with the CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool).

Consistent with the NCHE's procedures and guidelines, Code of Conduct and NCHE Terms of Reference for Reviewers, appropriate measures are in place for reviewers to declare their independence from the review exercise and they must sign confidentiality and no conflict-of-interest agreements (SAR, Interview with Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). In adherence to the principle of no-objection, as of recently, "the third quarter of 2024" (SAR, p. 43), the NCHE is granting an opportunity to HEIs to pronounce themselves on the proposed experts to avoid possible conflict of interest and doubt of the integrity of the assessment. The latter was backed through email correspondence between the NCHE and an institution which programmes underwent accreditation as well as the Heads of some Reviewed HEIs. The external review panel was impressed by this development and considered it a sound practice and encourages the NCHE to continue with it.

Analysis

The NCHE appoints experts external from the HEIs that are audited, and whose programmes are accredited, based on set criteria; however, all reviewers are drawn from Malawi. The review panel was concerned about the composition of the expert panels that excludes international reviewers and students, limiting the diversity and wealth of knowledge and experiences that foreign experts and students can bring to the review exercise. Students can play a vital role in the quality of their education, but the current practice denies them the opportunity to contribute their perceptions towards this course. However, the review panel was impressed with the NCHE's intent to involve students in review panels in the future through the pending Higher Education Bill. Moreover, the exclusion of international experts in the review panels reduces the chances for HEIs to learn from good QA practices gained through international perspectives.

The fact that the same category of experts is used for programme accreditation and institutional audits was worrisome. Apart from an architect who is included in the panels constituted for institutional audits, the review panel could not find any distinction between the expertise needed for programme accreditation and institutional audits while these two activities consider different criteria for assessment, requiring experts with different profiles, knowledge and skills. For example, some of the key issues assessed during institutional audits are governance and management, research and innovation, and community outreach or industry engagement. Review panels constituted under the current regulations for the composition of panels will not allow reviewers to make well-informed decisions on the capacity of an institution to offer academic programmes, which is the focus of institutional audits.

The review panel found the open call for applications as reviewers a good practice, it is transparent and adds value to the recruitment process of experts. The review panel is encouraging the NCHE to mainly recruit reviewers through published open calls for applications on its website and in the media to further increase the credibility of the recruitment process. In cases where suitably qualified reviewers cannot be found through the open call for applications, the NCHE could pull from the Reviewers Management Information System provided that work on the system is completed, it is duly implemented and appropriately updated with all the relevant information, e.g. bio data, qualifications and experience, etc. of reviewers.

Regarding the training of experts, the review panel was not convinced that the workshops sufficiently prepare the academicians and administrators who are serving as external experts on the NCHE's review panels. It could help the NCHE to prepare the experts sufficiently for reviews if the training focuses on issues relevant to the review, e.g. scope (Minimum Standards) and purpose of the review, code of conduct for reviewers, analysis of the SAR, etc., to guarantee the quality of assessments and the resultant ERRs.

The NCHE's procedures and guidelines regarding the declaration of independence and no conflict of interest are clear, and the review panel is content with it. Granting HEIs an opportunity to object to any member of proposed review panels, is viewed as a move in the right direction and found in line with ASG B4.

Conclusion

Partially compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE appoints independent review panels based on predefined criteria.
2. It is mandatory for reviewers to sign no conflict-of-interest declarations to ensure the review exercise is credible.
3. HEIs are given the opportunity prior to the review exercise to register no-objection to proposed experts with possible conflict of interest.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should widen representation of its external review panels for institutional audits to include expertise in research, financial management, governance and management, and community engagement.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should include international experts in their review panels to benefit from good QA practices of different EQA systems to further enhance the quality of Malawi's higher education system.
2. The NCHE should include students in their review panels to raise their awareness about QA issues in higher education, to empower them and help them to take responsibility for enhancing the quality of their own education.
3. The completion of work on the Reviewers Management Information System should be expedited to benefit from easily accessible information of reviewers when needed.
4. The NCHE should customise the training/orientation programme for external reviewers by including issues pertinent to the reviews, such as scope (Minimum Standards), purpose of the review, code of conduct for reviewers, analysis of the SAR, etc., in training programmes.

STANDARD 5. DECISION AND REPORTING OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OUTCOMES

> **Standard: Reports and decisions made as a result of EQA shall be clear, based on published standards, processes and procedures, and made accessible, for purposes of accountability.**

Evidence

According to the NCHE Act, the Minister may, on the recommendation of the Council, prescribe the institutional quality standards to govern the performance, operations and general conduct of HEIs (NCHE Act). The review panel observed that the Minimum Standards, assessment tools, guidelines and procedures, and frameworks, are published on the NCHE's website, making them available to HEIs and other stakeholders (Website, Accreditation Evaluation Framework, Minimum Standards for HEIs in Malawi) – see Part B S2. The quality criteria are included in the SAR template that is part of the Accreditation Regulations, which are available on the NCHE's website (SAR, Accreditation Regulations, Website). According to these documents, review panels must produce an ERR on programme accreditation and institutional audits, upon completion of the site visit. With the assistance of the administrator and the vice-chair, in the case of large audits, the chairperson of the review panel is responsible for taking notes during interviews as well as for consolidating the ERR (SAR, Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). As stated in the SAR, the expert panels are furnished with the report writing guidelines and a standardised template to prepare the report (Interview with Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool); however, the review panel could not find the template amongst the evidence nor on the NCHE's website.

Through a sample of ERRs that the review panel examined, it was observed that some reports are excessively long, e.g., one review report is 546 pages long, reporting on the accreditation and re-accreditation of 57 programmes assessed by a team of 30 experts, over a period of four days (Programme Accreditation Report of Mzuzu University). In the interview with Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool, it was noted that in such instances, finalisation of the report can be challenging for the chairperson. All the reports viewed for the purpose of this review included an introduction, objectives of the review, background on HEIs, methodology, experts contracted, observations, strengths, areas for improvement or non-conformities in the case of institutional audits, recommendations and the accreditation outcome. However, they generally lack clear discussions on the evidence, findings and analysis of the assessment.

Before the NCHE issues the final review report to HEIs, they are given an opportunity to comment on factual errors to ensure the accuracy of the reports and that outcomes are based on data verified by the institutions (SAR). This practice was introduced in 2018/2019, as reported by the QA Officers and the Heads of some Reviewed HEIs during their interviews.

In line with the NCHE's Accreditation Evaluation Framework, the final report is submitted to the NCHE's executive management for consideration that forwards the report to the QAAC for review and recommendation to the Council for final approval (Interviews with QAAC, CEO and Chairperson of the Board as well as the Ministry Representatives). The Council's resolution on the assessment and the final review report are dispersed to the institution (SAR, Letter to HEI on Council Resolution on Accreditation Outcome, Heads of some Reviewed HEIs). The NCHE does not publish the full report as confirmed by the Staff in charge of EQA Activities, but the final accreditation decision together with the names of the programmes and the HEIs are published in the government gazette, on the NCHE's website, through press releases in newspapers and other media platforms (SAR, Website, Accreditation Regulations, Interview with Staff in charge of EQA Activities). This procedure is in line with the Act, Part VII section 27, that states that "the Council shall publish the results of the accreditation process in the Gazette of any other media" (p. 18). Section 16 of the NCHE Act also mandates the Council to occasionally publish information on higher education if so required or that is to the benefit of the Council for the enhancement of its functions. It was reported that the private HEIs do not favour the publishing of outcomes on the NCHE's website, though they agreed that gazetting the outcomes is a good practice (Interview with Heads of some Reviewed HEIs).

Analysis

The ERRs contain all important sections as required in Part B S5, but the review panel was concerned about the depth of the analysis that could reduce the quality of the reports. It was difficult for the panel to see the relation between findings, analysis and conclusions. The reports lack adequate evidence to substantiate findings and conclusions. To strengthen the report writing aspect of experts and ensure they write well-articulated ERRs, the NCHE could embark on structured training for experts on effective report writing. This aspect could be included in the training programmes suggested in ASG B4.

Another observation of grave concern was the single lengthy ERR compiled for the accreditation of 57 programmes during one site visit. The methodology used to conduct the accreditation was not clear and to the satisfaction of the review panel. Considering the simultaneous accreditation of the large number of programmes reviewed in such a short period might raise questions about the rigour and quality of the accreditation process. Discipline-specific clustering of study programmes in the same fields for the purpose of accreditation is a common QA practice in higher education, but due diligence must be given to the exercise to maintain the rigour and quality of the assessment. The current approach taken might be due to "inadequate government funding to meet institutional needs" (SAR, p. 27), or a "fragile funding environment in the face of economic turndown" (SAR, p. 29) that prevents the NCHE to appoint individual review teams for each programme or for a cluster of programmes in the same field of study to do justice to the accreditation process. In addition, chairpersons of review panels might be overwhelmed being responsible for taking notes during the interviews which might cause them to be ineffective and not focussed on their actual duties.

The review panel found the factual verification of draft ERRs by HEIs in correspondence with acceptable good QA practices that contribute to the clarity of the data captured and transparency of the review process.

Based on the final decision-making processes and approval of the final ERR, the review panel found the procedures to be free from the influence of external parties. They are hence transparent and trustworthy. Once the reports are approved by the Council, they are shared with the institutions whose programmes were assessed or that were audited. The NCHE does not publish the full reports; only the accreditation decisions are made known on its website and via press releases which demonstrates some sort of accountability exercised by the NCHE. However, the review panel is encouraging the NCHE to consider publishing a summary of the ERRs which is in line with acceptable good practices in QA in higher education.

Conclusion

Partially compliant

Commendations

1. Although the full ERR is not published, decisions on external quality reviews are published which increases the accountability aspect of the NCHE.
2. HEIs are given an opportunity for factual verification of draft ERRs to ensure the accuracy of the reports.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should ensure that expert panels are thoroughly trained to write comprehensive ERRs that include a description of key documents examined and clear findings and analysis of the assessment to improve the standard of reporting (see also ASG B 4).
2. The NCHE should identify the most adequate way to publish ERRs and to present a summary of results of EQA.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE could appoint a secretary for every review who can take notes and assist the chairperson to compile the ERR.
2. The ERR template could be included in the Accreditation Regulations so that it is noted by all stakeholders.
3. The NCHE could do a thorough benchmarking exercise of cluster accreditation procedures to learn from good practices elsewhere that can benefit their current approach to programme accreditation.

> **Standard: EQA of institutions and programmes shall be undertaken on a cyclical basis.**

Evidence

The NCHE carries out periodic reviews of HEIs and their programmes (SAR). In terms of the cycle for programme accreditation, Part VII section 27 of the NCHE Act stipulates that the validity period of accreditation shall be one academic cycle as also outlined in the Accreditation Evaluation Framework. An academic cycle is a period required to complete a programme of study (NCHE Act, Part I section 2), which is in line with this standard of the ASG-QA. The cycle for institutional audits is seven years (Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2023, Accreditation Evaluation Framework, SAR). HEIs confirmed that the NCHE conducts programme accreditation and institutional audits on a regular basis, e.g., one of the institutions was accredited in 2018-2019 and re-accredited in 2024, for both programmes and the institution, while another institution was accredited in 2014 and re-accredited in 2021 (Heads of some Reviewed HEIs). According to the Accreditation Evaluation Framework, the NCHE may conduct assessment for re-accreditation of an institution and/or programme before the end of the academic cycle if there is evidence of serious inadequacies, which, according to the review panel, is a good practice consistent with continuous improvement.

To ensure consistency and prevent accreditation lapses, the NCHE notifies institutions of upcoming expirations, providing reminders to encourage timely applications for renewal. Moreover, the NCHE conducts periodic quality audits to verify compliance with the Minimum Standards and to identify areas requiring improvement. These evaluation schedules and timelines are maintained in an accessible and regularly updated database (NCHE Website), ensuring transparency and allowing institutions to effectively plan their accreditation processes.

Analysis

The NCHE's periodic review framework exemplifies a structured and transparent approach to QA, reinforcing accountability and continuous improvement in Malawi's higher education sector. By defining fixed accreditation cycles and proactively communicating renewal requirements, NCHE minimises the risk of institutions losing their accreditation status. The periodic quality audits complement this cyclical process, ensuring that institutions remain compliant with established standards while addressing any gaps. Transparency is further enhanced by maintaining a public database of accredited institutions and evaluation timelines, enabling stakeholders to access critical information easily.

However, there is a notable gap in the implementation of follow-up mechanisms to monitor whether institutions address recommendations provided in evaluation reports (see Part B S2 and S3). While NCHE provides detailed feedback to institutions following reviews, the absence of a structured system for tracking the implementation of improvement plans limits the assurance of sustained progress. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to leverage sector-wide learning by sharing anonymised examples of best practices and common challenges identified during evaluations, fostering collaboration and innovation among institutions.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE has a transparent and well-structured cyclical accreditation system, which ensures that institutions and programmes undergo regular evaluations to maintain compliance with quality standards.
2. The Agency's commitment to transparency is evident in its accessible database of evaluation schedules and accredited institutions, which serves to engage stakeholders effectively.
3. The NCHE's integration of quality audits within the periodic review process highlights its dedication to fostering accountability and continuous improvement. By aligning its practices with international standards, the NCHE enhances the credibility and recognition of higher education in Malawi.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should consider publishing anonymised summaries of best practices and recurring challenges observed during evaluations to encourage peer learning and promote continuous improvement.

STANDARD 7. COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

> **Standard: The procedure for lodging complaints and appeals shall be clearly defined and communicated to the institution concerned.**

Evidence

The NCHE does not have written procedures for handling appeals (SAR, Interviews with Senior Management Team, and QA Officers of HEIs), but recognises the necessity of having clearly defined and accessible procedures for managing complaints and appeals. While formalised, written guidelines for these processes have not yet been implemented, draft guidelines have been developed and are pending Council approval (SAR, Interview with QA Officers of HEIs). However, the review panel could not verify the development of the complaints and appeals guidelines as no evidence was provided of such. The SAR indicates that once approved, these guidelines will be disseminated widely to HEIs to ensure clarity, accountability, and transparency.

In the absence of formalised procedures, the NCHE has adopted interim measures to address complaints and appeals. According to the SAR, HEIs are encouraged to engage directly with the NCHE Secretariat to raise concerns or seek clarification regarding Council decisions on external assessments. This informal approach has been effective in providing professional and confidential resolutions, as illustrated by the SAR's reference to a communication exchange with Exploits University in Malawi, where the NCHE demonstrated responsiveness to institutional concerns. The proposed guidelines aim to formalise these processes by specifying clear steps, timelines, and criteria for appeals, ensuring alignment with stakeholder expectations and QA principles.

Analysis

The interim measures employed by the NCHE reflect a commitment to addressing institutional concerns in a manner that fosters trust and engagement with HEIs. By maintaining open lines of communication, the NCHE has ensured that institutions have a mechanism to voice grievances and seek clarification. This approach has helped to preserve the integrity of decision-making processes, even in the absence of formalised guidelines.

However, the reliance on informal practices introduces a risk of inconsistency in handling complaints and appeals, which may affect the perception of fairness and transparency. The lack of published guidelines also limits institutions' awareness of their rights and the appropriate procedures for seeking redress. By formalising the complaints and appeals process, the NCHE would not only meet the QA standard but also enhance accountability and institutional confidence in its decisions.

Conclusion

Non-compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE is commended for its proactive efforts in developing draft complaints and appeals guidelines, demonstrating its commitment to aligning, not only with the ASG-QA, but also with global QA standards.
2. The NCHE's professional and confidential handling of grievances, along with its active engagement with HEIs in addressing concerns, underscores its commitment to responsiveness, maintaining institutional trust, and continuously improving its QA processes.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should prioritise the finalisation and approval of the draft guidelines to strengthen its complaints and appeals framework. These guidelines should then be disseminated comprehensively to all HEIs through workshops, official communications, and publication on the NCHE's website.

PART C: INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

STANDARD 1. LEGAL STATUS

> **Standard: The QAA shall be an autonomous legal entity with clearly defined mandate, scope and powers. It will be recognised as a QAA at a national/regional level.**

Evidence

The NCHE derives its legal status, authority, and operational scope from the NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011, which provides a comprehensive framework for the Council's establishment and mandate. This Act provides the NCHE with the authority to oversee and ensure the quality of HEIs through key functions such as registration, accreditation, quality audits, and policy development. In line with this mandate, Section 19 of the Act requires all private HEIs to be registered before

commencing operations, while Section 28 mandates the accreditation of institutions and academic programmes to ensure compliance with established quality standards. Additionally, the NCHE plays a critical role in monitoring and evaluating the performance of HEIs through quality audits, institutional reviews, and spot checks, thereby safeguarding academic excellence and public interest. Beyond regulation, the Council also serves an advisory role to the Minister of Education by providing guidance on higher education policies and QA frameworks.

The operational scope of the NCHE extends to both public and private HEIs in Malawi, with the exception of technical colleges, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Technical, Entrepreneurial, and Vocational Education and Training Authority. Its responsibilities include regulating and licensing private HEIs, accrediting programmes to ensure their relevance, coordinating student selection into public universities, and recognising and verifying qualifications for academic and professional mobility. Furthermore, the NCHE actively engages in regional and international QA networks to benchmark Malawian higher education standards with global best practices.

The interview with the NCHE leaders (CEO and Chairperson) as well as with the Ministry Representatives emphasised the Council's autonomy, which is safeguarded by the Act and allows it to independently execute its QA mandate. The Council ensures impartiality by adhering to clearly defined regulations, such as excluding individuals with conflicts of interest from accreditation panels. Furthermore, the NCHE has developed regulations to operationalise its mandate effectively, although these regulations remain ungazetted, a situation attributed to delays at the Attorney General's office.

The NCHE's recognition extends beyond Malawi as it maintains active membership in regional networks such as the Southern Africa Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and the African Qualification Verification Network (AQVN). These affiliations enhance the NCHE's credibility and facilitate the adoption of regional good practices. Evidence of this recognition includes invitations to represent Malawi in regional forums, as confirmed by the Ministry Representatives, and the NCHE's collaboration with professional bodies and counterparts from other countries.

Stakeholder interviews (with Heads of some Reviewed HEIs) revealed that the NCHE has gained greater acceptance within the higher education community over time. The review panel was informed that, initially, HEIs were resistant to the NCHE's oversight, viewing it as overly regulatory. However, through consistent engagement, technical support, and dialogue, there was somewhat a change in the perception of HEIs of the NCHE as being a guiding and supporting partner in higher education than one that controlled them. Hence, the NCHE has fostered increased trust among institutions. This shift is reflected in improved relationships with HEIs and widespread compliance with the NCHE's processes.

Analysis

The NCHE Act provides a solid legal foundation for the Council's authority and operational independence. By outlining its mandate and defining its powers, the Act ensures that the NCHE functions effectively as an autonomous regulatory body. Based on the SAR, evidence examined, and information obtained during stakeholder's interviews, the review panel confirms that the NCHE has been established by an Act of parliament and is recognised for its work by HEIs, the government and other stakeholders. This autonomy is critical for maintaining objectivity in accrediting and monitoring HEIs, particularly in a context where impartiality is paramount. The

NCHE's transparent processes, such as publicising accreditation outcomes and involving stakeholders in policy development, further underscore its commitment to accountability and fairness.

The Council's membership in regional networks and its collaboration with professional bodies enhance its capacity to align with international standards. These relationships facilitate knowledge exchange, enable benchmarking, and position the NCHE as a credible QAA within the region. However, gaps in the legal framework, such as the lack of explicit guidelines for registration processes and an appeal clause for HEIs, highlight the need for legislative updates to strengthen NCHE's operational clarity and authority.

The delay in gazetting regulations poses challenges to the NCHE's ability to enforce its mandate comprehensively. Addressing these bottlenecks would further enhance the NCHE's capacity to regulate HEIs effectively and improve its credibility among stakeholders.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE is commended for its robust legal foundation, which ensures operational autonomy and supports its extensive mandate.
2. The Agency's proactive efforts to engage with HEIs and regional bodies demonstrate its commitment to fostering trust and collaboration.
3. The NCHE's focus on aligning Malawian higher education standards with regional and international practices underscores its dedication to maintaining quality and relevance in a competitive global landscape.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should prioritise the gazetting of its regulations to ensure the full operationalisation of its mandate.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should conduct periodic reviews of its legislative framework to address emerging challenges and align with evolving regional and global trends. Strengthening its engagement with regional networks through collaborative initiatives and benchmarking exercises would further enhance its credibility and effectiveness.
2. The NCHE should improve communication with HEIs by providing detailed guidance on its legal authority and processes to foster greater transparency and trust.

STANDARD 2. VISION AND MISSION STATEMENT

> **Standard: The QAA shall have written and published vision and mission statements or objectives taking the higher education context into account.**

Evidence

The NCHE operates under a clearly articulated vision and mission that guide its regulatory activities in Malawi's higher education sector (SAR). Its vision, "to be a higher education regulator

which supports the systematic growth and excellence of HEIs in Malawi," emphasises its role in fostering institutional quality and alignment with national and international standards. This vision is further supported by the mission statement, "to promote quality, accessible, relevant, and inclusive higher education and training in Malawi through the use of best practices in higher education regulation."

Interviews with the NCHE staff confirmed that the vision and mission statements provide a cohesive framework for the Council's governance and operations (Interview with Finance and Administration Department of the Agency). The Council has developed a strategic plan that outlines specific goals, objectives, and action steps to ensure the systematic implementation of its mission (NCHE Strategic Plan 2021-2026). Annual work plans and budgets, aligned with this strategic plan, are reviewed, implemented, and reported to the government through comprehensive annual reports.

To fulfil its mission, the NCHE conducts a range of activities, including registration and accreditation of HEIs, quality audits, and research on higher education issues (NCHE Strategic Plan 2021-2026). For example, the Council's research on access and equity in higher education, presented at national conferences in 2018 and 2021, reflects its commitment to inclusivity and evidence-based policymaking (SAR). The SAR states that the research is intended to inform the Ministry of Education's policy direction on higher education; this was confirmed by the Ministry Representatives. These activities are reinforced by the strategic plan, which outlines specific goals and objectives that align with its QA mandate (NCHE Strategic Plan 2021-2026).

Additionally, the NCHE facilitates the equitable selection of students to public institutions (NCHE Act, Interviews with CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and Ministry Representatives), a role highly appreciated by stakeholders as it promotes access to higher education across diverse demographics (Interviews with QA Officers of HEIs, and Student Representative Councils from some Reviewed HEIs). The Agency also runs stakeholder workshops to discuss challenges and identify solutions to complement its strategic plan which is also distributed to stakeholders (Interview with Finance and Administration Department of the Agency).

While the NCHE's vision and mission provide a strong foundation for its operations, greater dissemination of these statements among HEIs and the public could enhance alignment and engagement. In support of this, the review panel observed that the Agency intends to expand the staffing complement to manage the increasing demand for visibility campaigns (NCHE Annual Report, April 2022-March 2023). In addition, workshops, forums, and regular updates could improve awareness of how the NCHE's strategic goals translate into tangible benefits for the higher education sector.

Analysis

The NCHE's vision and mission statements establish a clear strategic direction that aligns with the challenges and opportunities in Malawi's higher education landscape. By emphasising quality, accessibility, inclusivity, and relevance, the NCHE demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the sector's priorities. These guiding principles are effectively operationalised through strategic plans, annual work plans, and detailed reporting mechanisms that ensure transparency and accountability.

The Council's proactive approach to fulfilling its mission is evident in its diverse initiatives, including accreditation, quality audits, and policy-oriented research. Its research on access and

equity exemplifies the NCHE's ability to address pressing sectoral challenges and contribute to national development. The Council's role in coordinating student selection processes further demonstrates its commitment to inclusivity and equitable access to higher education.

Despite these strengths, the limited visibility of the NCHE's vision and mission statements among stakeholders suggests a missed opportunity for deeper engagement. Ensuring that HEIs and the general public understand and align with the NCHE's objectives could foster stronger collaboration and support for the Council's initiatives.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE is commended for its clearly articulated vision and mission statements, which reflect a comprehensive approach to promoting quality, accessibility, and inclusive higher education.
2. The Council's strategic planning processes, including quality audits, accreditation assessments, and research, demonstrate its dedication to fostering excellence and equity.
3. The NCHE's role in aligning national higher education standards with international best practices enhances its credibility as a QAA.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should actively promote its vision and mission through stakeholder engagements, institutional meetings, and social media channels.
2. The NCHE should enhance its annual reports by including analyses of how its strategic goals are achieved and their impact on the higher education sector.
3. The NCHE should foster closer collaboration with HEIs and other stakeholders in co-developing initiatives that align with its mission to strengthen collective ownership of QA efforts.

STANDARD 3. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

> **Standard: The QAA shall have clearly defined structures that ensure sound and ethical governance and management, including good practices of QA that support its mission and legal mandate.**

Evidence

The governance structure of the NCHE is defined by the NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011, which establishes the Council's role in overseeing Malawi's higher education sector. The structure includes a governing board (Council), an executive management team led by the CEO, and various specialised committees that support the implementation of the NCHE's mission and legal mandate. The Council consists of six independent members, appointed by the Minister of Education for their expertise in higher education. These members are not public servants, ensuring impartiality. In addition to the independent members, the Council also includes ex-officio members from relevant government and private sectors. Their tenure is three years, with provisions for reappointment. The NCHE has a qualified and experienced leadership team that is

able to oversee the development of the Agency in line with best practices in QA in higher education (Curricula Vitae [CVs] of Council Members and CEO).

The Council operates through specialised committees such as the QAAC; Finance, Appointments and Administration Committee; and Audit Risk Management Committee. These committees provide oversight and technical guidance in critical areas, including QA, financial management, and risk evaluation.

The NCHE Secretariat is led by the CEO, who is accountable to the Council and responsible for the day-to-day management of the Agency. The CEO is supported by directors of four departments: Registration and Accreditation; Standards and Quality Audits; Finance and Administration; and Planning, Research and Development. According to the SAR, the CEO and the directors possess relevant qualifications and have considerable experience in their areas of responsibility at the NCHE (CVs of Staff examined during the site visit). During their tenure of office, they have had several opportunities to participate in professional development programmes and activities including benchmarking visits within the region to strengthen their capacity to serve in their current posts.

The NCHE's commitment to good governance is also reflected in its adherence to policies and procedures that ensure financial integrity, transparency, and accountability. These include the Public Finance Management Act of 2022, the NCHE Financial Policies and Procedures Manual, and various internal policies such as the Staff Terms and Conditions of Service, Training Policy, Grievance Handling Policy, and Fraud and Corruption Prevention Policy. Furthermore, the NCHE implements these policies through institutional committees such as the Staff Development and Training Committee; HIV/AIDS Committee; Communications Committee; Disciplinary Committee; Internal Procurement and Disposal of Assets Committee; and Institutional Integrity Committee (IIC) among others. Despite these strong structures, the SAR states that some committees are not fully functional due to limited monitoring mechanisms and competing priorities. For example, the NCHE plans to integrate committee functionality into its Performance Management System (PMS), which would help strengthen the effectiveness of these bodies.

According to the SAR, the NCHE has a clear communication system in place to disseminate information and maintain public accountability (NCHE Communication Strategy). The NCHE regularly issues press releases, gazettes, and updates via its website and social media platforms. Stakeholder meetings, such as those with Vice-Chancellors and Chairpersons of Councils, as well as Technical Working Groups for public universities, further demonstrate the NCHE's commitment to be transparent in its operations.

Analysis

The NCHE's governance and management structure demonstrates a clear commitment to sound governance, ethical practices, and effective management. The review panel is satisfied with NCHE's commitment to effective governance that ensures the achievement of intended goals and objectives.

The Council's composition and its work through specialised committees ensure balanced and informed decision-making. The roles and functions of the different committees are clearly stated in the regulations and the Council has developed policies and procedures to handle staff misconduct and grievances as well as ethical standards and guidelines.

The CEO and executive team's qualifications and leadership play a pivotal role in ensuring the effective execution of NCHE's mandate. The senior management's involvement in professional development and regional benchmarking further strengthens the Council's capacity to respond to evolving demands in higher education.

The NCHE's financial integrity is ensured through adherence to national financial regulations and internal policies, which promote accountability and transparency. Furthermore, the Agency's engagement with stakeholders, including university leaders and the general public, is facilitated through regular updates, meetings, and communication strategies such as press releases and website updates. This transparency fosters trust and encourages collaboration.

However, the lack of a QA Management Information System (MIS) and the limited functionality of some committees hinder the NCHE's ability to fully monitor and evaluate service delivery. The absence of a fully operational QA MIS limits the NCHE's ability to track performance effectively and implement its service charter. These gaps underscore the need for technological improvements and enhanced monitoring systems.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE has a comprehensive governance framework, which includes a transparent appointment process for Council members and strong adherence to financial integrity standards.
2. The leadership provided by the CEO and executive team ensures effective execution of the Council's mandate.
3. The NCHE plays a leadership role as a driver of QA processes in the country that has been recognised by different stakeholders and the academic community. The NCHE has contributed to creating a QA culture at HEIs, raising awareness on the need for compliance with quality standards and accreditation.
4. The NCHE's ongoing engagement with stakeholders demonstrates its commitment to fostering collaboration and transparency.
5. The NCHE's proactive approach to strengthening governance policies, including integrity measures, showcases its commitment to ethical and accountable management.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should prioritise the integration of committee functionality into the PMS and monitoring and evaluation system to enhance governance and management. This will help ensure consistent oversight and accountability across all committees.
2. The NCHE should prioritise the development of a QA MIS to improve data management, service delivery monitoring, and the overall effectiveness of operational processes.

Standard 4. Independence of Quality Assurance Agency

> **Standard: The QAA shall be independent in its operations, outcomes, judgements and decisions.**

Evidence

The NCHE was established as an autonomous QA body by its governing law (NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011). The sovereignty of the NCHE is evident in its law, which stipulates that the Agency "is a body corporate with perpetual succession and common seal capable of suing and being sued under its corporate name" (Section 3, p. 4), with the assigned powers "to do all acts, matters and things as it considers necessary for the fulfilment of the functions of the Council" (Section 16, p. 11). Furthermore, the Council has the designated power under the NCHE Act to appoint the CEO who is responsible for managing the daily affairs of the Council and the Secretariat, supported by four directors (SAR). According to section 4 of the NCHE Act, individuals from government offices who serve on the council in an ex officio capacity are "… not, by virtue of their appointment to the council, deemed to be officers in the public service" (p.5), which underscores the autonomy of the NCHE's work from the government. This was confirmed by the Ministry Representatives during their interview. However, the review panel noticed a potential risk flagged by the Secretariat, i.e. dependence on government funding for its operations (SAR, NCHE Strategic Plan 2021-2026), which could weaken the independence of the NCHE's work from third parties. However, upon further probing during the interviews with various stakeholder groups (CEO and Chairperson of the Board, SAR Team, Finance and Administration Department of the Agency), it was clarified that apart from other third-stream income generating strategies, the NCHE offers accreditation services on a cost-recovery basis ensuring sustainability of the Agency.

Regarding operational independence, the NCHE has in place comprehensive guidelines for the appointment of reviewers (Reviewers' Guidelines and Terms of Reference for Assessment of HEIs, Interviews with Senior Management, and the Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). Through these guidelines, the NCHE ensures that reviewers uphold the highest standards of professional conduct and integrity throughout the evaluation process (SAR). As explained in Part B S4, there is provision for no-objection for HEIs which programmes are submitted for accreditation or that undergoes quality audits. In addition, independent experts are recruited through a public call for reviewers in the media as well as on its website (see Part B S4), which further demonstrates the NCHE's operational independence. Furthermore, the NCHE has conflict of interest guidelines in place that apply to the Secretariat staff, council members, consultants, including reviewers, and any individual or entity that has a business relationship with the NCHE (Interviews with QAAC, and the Senior Management Team, Conflict of Interest Guidelines, Code of Conduct for Council Members).

Concerning the independence of formal outcomes, a multi-tiered approach is followed (SAR, Accreditation Evaluation Framework, Interview with QAAC), i.e. upon completion of the site visit, the draft external review report is submitted to the NCHE's executive management for consideration and if any gaps or inconsistencies are identified, the report is returned to the review panel for checking. The report is then submitted to the QAAC for review and recommendation to the Council that makes the final decision based on the QAAC's recommendations. Approval of the final external review report is done by the Council without the need for external approval or validation by a third-party. It was confirmed during the interview with the Ministry Representatives that the Ministry does not have a role in the NCHE's decision-making processes; it only gets updated on the Council's decisions.

Analysis

The review panel is of the view that the NCHE enjoys total organisational independence, renders to the Agency by its law. Although the council members are appointed by the Minister, the Ministry does not interfere in the way the council runs its affairs, nor does it question the council's decisions and outcomes resulting from institutional and programme assessments.

The evidence examined, clearly demonstrates that the NCHE is fully independent in defining its detailed assessment methodologies and in recruiting experts for external review panels. The existing procedures for identifying, appointing and engaging external reviewers in its EQA processes guarantee fair, professional and independent evaluations.

Experts from various stakeholder backgrounds are conducting programme accreditation and generate a report, but the onus lies with the NCHE to vet the final outcome of assessments. The structured multi-pronged approach adopted by the NCHE for the approval of review outcomes is testimony that the Agency's QA processes are its sole responsibility.

Based on the document analysis and the insights and information obtained from the various stakeholder groups involved in the interviews, the review panel concludes that the NCHE is a sovereign institution carrying out its functions free from the influence of third parties.

In terms of the NCHE's concern about its dependency on government funding, the review panel is satisfied that the Agency demonstrates financial competence to generate additional funds to sustain its EQA activities.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE is solely responsible for approving the final outcome of its assessment activities which shows that it operates free from interference from the Ministry and other third parties.

STANDARD 5. POLICIES, PROCESSES AND ACTIVITIES

> **Standard: The QAA shall undertake its QA activities in accordance with the standards and guidelines articulated in Part B of the ASG-QA.**

Evidence

According to the SAR, the NCHE has developed policies and processes that govern the various aspects of its QA activities and ensure transparency in its regulatory functions. As explained in Part B S 2 in this report, various EQA mechanisms (HEQAF, Accreditation Regulations, Minimum Standards), published on its website, guide the assessment of HEIs' ability to deliver quality education. The standards have been benchmarked with regional and international counterparts (Interviews with the CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and the SAR Team), e.g. South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, England, and the United States of America, including the ASG-QA (see Part B S2).

In particular, the minimum standards are designed to assess the core areas of a programme or an institution, such as teaching, learning and assessment; research and innovation; and

community engagement, including related resources, such as staff, facilities and internal QA mechanisms amongst other, required to ensure quality outputs are delivered (Interviews with the CEO and Chairperson of the Board, and Representatives from the Reviewers' Pool). External review reports studied by the review panel demonstrate assessment of the mentioned core areas of the concerned HEIs (Quality Audit Report Skyway University, May 2024; Mzuzu University Programme Accreditation Assessment Report, January 2024).

The QA tools were discussed with and validated by HEIs, including other stakeholders of the Agency, during various workshops (Newsletters on NCHE's Website). Staff in charge of EQA activities informed the review panel that the QA tools were validated in stakeholders' workshops by the institutions and professional bodies. The stakeholders confirmed that they are acquainted with the NCHE's activities, QA tools, and assessment processes (Interview with QA Officers of HEIs). In addition, the NCHE has regular stakeholder engagement meetings with HEIs and other stakeholders to disseminate information on the NCHE's mandate, its QA frameworks and operations, including expectations and obligations of HEIs; and to create a platform to collaboratively explore ways to nurture a productive, effective, and efficient partnership and feedback system within the space of the NCHE's regulatory functions (Report on Engagement Meetings with Vice-chancellors and Registrars of HEIs, April 2024).

The NCHE conducts regular programme accreditation and institutional audits (see Part B S6) based on the main EQA processes (see Part B S3) as proposed in the ASG-QA, i.e. validation of the HEI's self-assessment against the NCHE's standards and processes; external assessment conducted by the review panel; external review report compiled by the review panel; and follow-up activity to see how HEIs address or implement the recommendations raised in the final report (SAR, Interview with Senior Management Team).

Furthermore, HEIs are informed in advance about the Agency's planned visits for assessment purposes (Sample Notice of Quality Audits to HEIs Prior to External Reviews, Report on a Pre-assessment Visit to a HEI in Preparation of Programme Accreditation). The review panel also viewed the improvement plan template as well as an improvement plan completed by a HEI that explains how the accreditation recommendations will be addressed (Sample Improvement Plan - University of Livingstonia Rice Satellite Campus).

Analysis

The review panel confirms that the NCHE has set standards and processes in place for programme accreditation and institutional audits that are clear, reliable and consistently implemented. Apart from a few shortcomings as explained in Part B S3, S4 and S5 in this report, i.e. the exclusion of international experts and students on external review panels as well as failure to publish full reports generated from the assessment of HEIs and the programmes they offer, the Agency carries out its QA activities in consonance with the standards and guidelines articulated in Part B of the ASG-QA. For example, the NCHE's EQA activities are based on submission of a SAR by HEIs that undergo an audit or whose programmes are accredited; appointment of an external expert panel that conducts the assessment; compilation of the ERR by the expert panel; validation of the draft report by HEIs through a factual error checking; approval of the report by the Council; publication of the accreditation decision; and the submission of an improvement plan by HEIs.

The review panel confirms that HEIs are aware of NCHE's activities, are informed in advance about planned site visits of the Agency, and that the NCHE conducts its external QA activities on a regular basis.

Furthermore, the review panel gathered from the interviews conducted that for the sake of transparency, stakeholder buy-in and trust, the NCHE does consult HEIs regularly for input in the development of EQA mechanisms. The review panel has observed that most of the activities carried out in support of Part C S5, were done in 2024, as shown by the documents examined for the assessment of this standard. Despite this, the panel is content with this finding as it demonstrates the NCHE's efforts and commitment to comply with the ASG-QA.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE's activities and processes are conducted in a transparent manner, and they are documented and validated by stakeholders.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE could train HEIs on the ASG-QA to deepen their own understanding of the standards.

STANDARD 6. INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: The QAA shall have in place policies and processes for its own IQA related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of its activities.

Evidence

The NCHE does not have a stand-alone IQA policy per se. However, to demonstrate the Agency's professional conduct and accountability for improving the quality of its own internal operations, the review panel learned through a desk review of the evidence provided and the interviews conducted with the various stakeholder groups, that the NCHE has put in place various policies, procedures and guidelines (see Part C S3) to ensure objectivity and fairness in its work (Financial Policies and Procedures Manual, Recruitment Policy, Corruption and Fraud Prevention Policy, Ethics and Professional Conduct Charter). The IIC was established in 2016 to not only comply with the National Anti-Corruption Strategy of Malawi but to also protect the NCHE staff who, by virtue of their work, may be susceptible to corruptive influence while carrying out their daily duties. The IIC was inducted in 2020 on their mandate and had a re-orientation session in 2022 upon which the Committee became active (Terms of Reference for Institutional Integrity Committee, 2018; Interview with the Finance and Administration Department of the Agency). The review panel has also noted that the NCHE has developed conflict of interest guidelines that apply to the Secretariat staff, council members, reviewers, consultants and anyone else that the NCHE contracts or commissions to do work on its behalf (Conflict of Interest Guidelines for the Secretariat, Council, Reviewers, Consultants; Interview with Senior Management Team). In addition to the Ethics and Professional Conduct Charter, these guidelines were developed with the view to promote a culture and climate where the Council, Secretariat, and its stakeholders strive for conduct that is beyond reproach; to provide an environment where a potential conflict

of interest is declared and acted upon accordingly; and to strengthen accountability, integrity, and moral and ethical behaviour among any individuals or entities that have or will have a business relationship with the NCHE.

The NCHE has a fairly new monitoring and evaluation system, which will help to guide the Agency to carry out its activities and assess its performance with the aim of continuous improvement (Interview with the CEO and Chairperson of the Board). Through its PMS, bi-annual performance assessments and appraisals are done of which the outcome is submitted to the CEO and the Council, and staff are duly rewarded in the form of training and other assistance (Interview with Finance and Administration Department of the Agency, NCHE Staff Development Training Plan for 2022-2023, 2023-2024 and 2024-2025). The training plan indicated that some staff completed short courses and some full qualifications in various fields such as leadership and management, procurement, QA (quite a number of staff developed themselves in QA). Some of these training courses were sponsored by NCHE. Meetings for section heads as well as staff meetings are held on a regular basis to talk about challenges, reflect and discuss strategies to improve (Interview with Senior Management Team).

For the purpose of continuous improvement, the NCHE has conducted a client satisfaction survey in the 2022-2023 financial year to assess the satisfaction and perceptions of HEIs regarding the Agency's EQA processes and gather actionable feedback to enhance the effectiveness, transparency, and overall experience of these regulatory procedures (Interview with Senior Management Team). The findings showed that the majority of HEIs (79%) feel that NCHE meets their expectations either always or most of the time, indicating a generally high quality of services provided (Client Satisfaction Survey Report 2022-2023 Financial Year). In addition, an employee satisfaction survey was conducted to assess the level of satisfaction of the Secretariat with the NCHE's policies, procedures, and management practices (Employee Satisfaction Survey Results, May 2023). The objective of the survey was to assist the Council to identify areas that need improvement and develop strategies to address them.

High on the NCHE's list of priorities is a mandatory annual financial audit (Audited Financial Statements for the Year Ended March 2024) conducted by an external auditor with whom a contract has been signed (Letter of Appointment of External Auditors, Grant Thornton, and Contract for the 2024-2025 Financial Year). The outcome of the audit reflected that it was a true and fair view of the financial position of NCHE, its financial performance and its cash flows for the year. In addition, an internal auditor who is part of the Secretariat's permanent structure, monitors payments during the year and conducts annual audits of financial transactions (Interview with Finance and Administration Department of the Agency). The audits are based on criteria for payments, risks, findings, recommendations for action, management comments and management agreed actions (Internal Auditor Report on Financial Transactions for the Period from October-December 2023, dated July 2024).

Furthermore, the NCHE has developed a communications strategy in 2018 with the vision of enhancing communication between the Agency and the public to dispel misconceptions, improve internal and external communication, and enable it to contribute to Malawi's socio-economic development (NCHE Communications Strategy 2018). (See also Part C S3.)

In terms of follow-up mechanisms, the Agency has designed an instrument to collect feedback from accredited institutions about the accreditation process, support provided by the Agency, and areas for improvement (Post-accreditation Evaluation Form for HEIs, August 2024). However,

it was confirmed during the interview with the Agency's staff in charge of EQA Activities that they had not yet implemented the instrument as they are still fine-tuning the form. A reporting mechanism in terms of feedback on assessment processes that NCHE has currently in place is a "back-to-office report" (Interview with QAAC) submitted to the CEO to provide feedback on the accreditation or audit process.

The review panel found that NCHE does not yet engage in thematic analyses of external reviews, assessments as well as evaluations of institutions and their programmes.

Analysis

The NCHE does not yet have its own IQA policy and implementing procedures, but the Agency has in place various other policies, guidelines and mechanisms that are focused on enhancing the internal quality of its work. The review panel found that the NCHE acts in a professional and ethical manner supported by, amongst others, the Corruption and Fraud Prevention Policy; Ethics and Professional Conduct Charter; IIC; Conflict of Interest Guidelines for the Secretariat, Council, Reviewers, Consultants; staff performance appraisal system; staff development training initiatives; and the collection of feedback from employees and clients. Complimentary to its statutory external annual financial audits, the NCHE conducts regular internal audits of its financial transactions, which demonstrates prudency that can assist the Council to be conservative in its spending and avoid capital expenditures that could risk its cash flow.

The review panel found that the NCHE is an active learning organisation. Regular training and staff development opportunities are granted to the staff to upskill themselves and expand their capabilities, especially in QA which is the core function of the NCHE. Agency staff that the review panel met were conscious of doing their work in a quality assured way, to work in a professional manner and to seek out, listen to and act on feedback. Regular feedback through employee and client satisfaction surveys, staff and section head meetings, reports generated after accreditation and audit assessments, and its communication strategy, assist and guide the NCHE to improve current IQA practices. The review panel found the post-accreditation evaluation survey, which is still a draft, encouraging and urges the NCHE to complete the form to benefit from possible constructive feedback it may gain from the evaluations for continuous enhancement of the Agency's work. The review panel confirms that the NCHE does not conduct thematic analysis and encourages the Agency to include this activity in its annual work plans because it could be a key indicator for the development of relevant policies in higher education that can help to strengthen the quality of higher education in Malawi.

Conclusion

Partially compliant

Commendations

1. Apart from the absence of a formal IQA policy, the NCHE has other mechanisms in place, such as internal and external annual financial audits, employee and client satisfaction surveys, the IIC, etc. to evaluate its performance.
2. The staff are exposed to regular professional development trainings and other initiatives to enhance their qualifications and skills, especially in QA.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should develop an IQA policy, including guidelines for implementation, to assist it to monitor and evaluate its activities in a structured manner for continuous improvement of its own internal quality assurance.
2. The NCHE should regularly conduct thematic analyses (produce a summary of reports), which describe and analyse the general trends in the findings of external programme accreditation and institutional reviews for possible policy direction.
3. The NCHE should finalise the post-accreditation evaluation form which should include evaluation questions for both the Secretariat staff who coordinate assessments (to be completed by HEIs and external review panels) as well as the external review panels (to be completed by HEIs).

STANDARD 7. FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

> **Standard: The QAA shall have adequate and appropriate human, financial and material resources to carry out its QA mandate effectively and efficiently.**

Evidence

In accordance with the NCHE Act, Part VIII section 31, the NCHE's funds are derived from moneys appropriated by the Parliament for the purpose of the Council; any fees payable under the NCHE Act (e.g., fees for provisional and final registration of private HEIs, application fee for the amendment of the charter of private HEIs); such other moneys and assets as may vest in or accrue to the Council in the course of its functions; any civil penalties collected under the Act; such moneys or other assets as may accrue to or vest in the Council by way of grants, bequests, donations or gifts from any other person; and other lawful sources of funding. The major source of funding is the subsidy provided by the Government of Malawi, which is 52.81% of the budget (Interview with Finance and Administration Department of the Agency), while self-generated income and partners contribute 24.83% and 22.36%, respectively. The annual budget for 2024–2025 is 2,909,828,790 Malawian Kwacha (NCHE Approved Budget for 2024–2025). The budget utilisation is distributed as follows: Department of Registration and Accreditation, 25.37% Department of Standards and Quality Audits, 13.00%; Department of Planning, Research and Development, 13.26%; and the Department of Finance and Administration, 48.37%.

To ensure sustainability of its activities as indicated in its strategic plan (NCHE Strategic Plan 2021–2026), the NCHE has put in place some strategies for self-generated income, i.e., annual subscription fees – 300 000 Malawian Kwacha – paid by HEIs (Interview with SAR Team), and fees for services (registration and accreditation) that are provided on a cost-recovery basis. The CEO and Chairperson of the Board have informed the review panel that from 1 April 2025, the subscription fees will be based on the size of HEIs. However, the Agency has admitted that the budget is not always adequate to achieve its goals and objectives and that it experiences cash flow problems (SWOT Analysis, SAR, pp. 27 & 29; Interview with the Finance and Administration Department of the Agency). This situation limits the NCHE to consistently implement its QA activities as required by Part B S3, particularly QA audits, as the Agency must cater for staff salaries and other expenses. However, the NCHE has other strategies in place to cover up the costs of quality audits, i.e. verification of qualifications and paid training workshops offered to HEIs (SAR, Interviews with SAR Team, Finance and Administration Department of the Agency, Resource Mobilisation Receipts for Payments Made from 24-31 August 2024 by Various HEIs for

QA Training Workshops Initiated by NCHE or Requested by HEIs). In addition, the pending Higher Education Bill includes a levy on student fees whereby the NCHE will get a certain amount from the fees paid by each student (Interview with CEO and Chairperson of the Board). Another source of income for the Agency, is donor funding through partnerships, for example, with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the World Bank (SAVE project). From COL, the NCHE received 10 000 Canadian Dollars for a once-off project on prior learning in 2023 and to develop guidelines for bridging courses. From the World Bank, the NCHE got USD 926 000 for a government project under the Ministry of Education that runs for five years. This money is used to fund systems development.

The NCHE has its own building (SAR, Title Deed of Land registered in NCHE's name on 12th August 2016), housing 33 staff members and is equipped with Information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure that supports effective operations (Offices viewed during site visit; Fixed Asset Register listing office furniture and fittings, NCHE building, plant and equipment, motor vehicles, ICT equipment and accessories owned by NCHE). However, the SAR indicates that the office space is not entirely adequate as most of the staff members share offices.

The NCHE has qualified and diverse staff members with clearly stipulated roles to carry out their QA activities (SAR, Details of Staff in terms of Qualifications and Gender; and CVs of Staff examined during the site visit). There is a training policy, although it was not included in the evidence files, and the Agency does training needs assessments for the QA and other staff members. For continuous professional development, in-house trainings, using online platforms, are conducted so that the staff can capacitate themselves in the use of technology (Interview with Finance and Administration Department of the Agency). Additionally, the NCHE considers gender and inclusivity in its recruitment (Recruitment Policy, 2017). However, as per the functional review report, the NCHE requires 54 staff members, but it has only managed to recruit 33 members of staff (13 females and 20 males, according to the Details of Staff in terms of Qualifications and Gender), representing 61% of the requirement. Moreover, the QA departments require 14 staff members and only 7 (50%) are on the ground (SAR, Details of Staff in terms of Qualifications and Gender). The Secretariat ascribed the shortage of staff to funding restraints. The concerns in relation to the practical management plans and the capacity of the NCHE to deliver timely its mandate is also linked with the Agency's lack of human resources. Despite having a group of motivated and dedicated staff, the NCHE is understaffed both regarding the quantity and quality of technical staff to fulfil the demand for accreditation and assessment of programmes and HEIs. Moving forward, the NCHE plans to recruit additional staff members in a phased approach (SAR).

Analysis

The NCHE's main source of income is the government subsidy which is 52.81% "of what is the ideal", according to the Agency's Finance and Administration Department. However, the Agency has additional sources of income generated through registration and accreditation fees, application fees for the amendment of the charter of private HEIs; and other third-stream income sources, such as annual subscriptions fees paid by HEIs, verification of qualifications, and paid training workshops offered to HEIs and donor funds. In addition, considering the NCHE's intention to base the annual subscription fees of HEIs on the size of the institutions, from 1st April 2025, the review panel feels that this will contribute to increasing its income because the Agency might generate more funds from larger HEIs than the 300 000 Malawian Kwacha that all HEIs pay

currently. This will also contribute to increased transparency and fairness towards smaller HEIs. The student levies that the Council wants to introduce through the pending Higher Education Bill will further contribute to increasing the finances of the Secretariat although it might take some time before this may become a reality as it is dependent on the approval of the Bill. All these initiatives might put the Agency in a better financial position in the future to improve its EQA activities (introducing regular audits and follow-ups – Part B S3 – and including international experts in review panels – Part B S4).

Furthermore, the NCHE is the legal owner of the piece of land on which the office block is constructed. The review panel also found out that the office space is sufficient, and that there is no sharing of offices as indicated in the SAR. There are more than enough open offices to accommodate any new appointments that may be made in the future. It was also found that the NCHE has adequate ICT infrastructure, furniture, vehicles and equipment for use by staff in the course of their duty.

The review panel notes that the NCHE's recruitment policy has been followed as the staff meet the criteria for appointment as stipulated in the policy document. Indeed, the staff of NCHE are qualified and have the requisite experience to carry out the functions as given in the Act of Parliament No. 15 of 2011. However, the review panel feels that the QA staff available to the Agency are inadequate. This scenario will have a negative impact on the NCHE to carry out its QA mandate successfully. With plans underway to recruit more staff, the NCHE will be able to address the critical staff shortages in the QA departments, and it will also provide an opportunity to recruiting more female staff to achieve a greater gender balance in the organisation.

Conclusion

Partially compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE has its own building with the potential to expand the infrastructure to accommodate more staff in future.
2. The NCHE has strategies in place for generating third-stream income to supplement the government subsidy.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should develop a plan to identify the human resource needs and motivate the recruitment of more staff in the QA departments.
2. The NCHE should reconsider the financial structure to make it more sustainable and more balanced between revenues and expenditures.

STANDARD 8. BENCHMARKING, NETWORKING AND COLLABORATION

Standard: The QAA shall promote and participate in international initiatives, workshops and conferences, and collaborate with relevant bodies on QA to exchange and share experiences and best practices.

Evidence

Part III section 15 of the NCHE Act mandates the Council to: present interests of the Malawian higher education, regionally and internationally; monitor the implementation of international agreements concerning higher education; and promote international cooperation and facilitate exchanges in higher education. While the NCHE engages in some of these activities, the review panel learnt that the Agency currently does not have a formal internationalisation policy (SAR, Interview with CEO and Chairperson of the Board). Its networking strategies include membership to regional (SAQAN) and continental (AQVN) QA networks and participation in conferences (SAR). The SAR states that the NCHE is a board member of SAQAN and was represented in the planning committee of the 6th SAQAN conference that took place in Livingstone, Zambia, in September 2025. The NCHE is a paid-up member of both SAQAN (as of 30 August 2024) and AQVN (as of 22 August 2024).

Nationally, the Agency collaborates with relevant professional bodies such as the Medical Council of Malawi, engaging in joint accreditation activities (Interviews with Senior Management Team, and Staff in charge of EQA Activities); Malawi Accountants Board (MAB); and the Malawi Institute of Legal Education. The professional bodies and the NCHE have Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). Examples of such memoranda are between the NCHE and MAB, and also with the Technical, Entrepreneurial, Vocational Education and Training Authority (SAR, NCHE's Newsletter Vol. 3, Issue 1, October 2023, Interview with CEO on Clarification of Pending Issues). Proof of these agreements has been presented to the review panel. The MoUs aim to eliminate duplication of efforts, ensure harmonisation of regulatory instruments and processes, enhance efficient use of resources, and improve coordination in accreditation of institutions and programmes. Representatives of Professional Bodies informed the review panel that there is regular consultation between the NCHE and themselves. Before the NCHE accredits HEIs and their programmes, it consults professional bodies, and NCHE also sits on the boards and committees of professional bodies (Interview with Professional Bodies and Employers). The review panel also noted that there is a draft MoU that still needs to be signed between the NCHE and the Nurses and Midwifery Council, and some other MoUs are in progress (Interview with Staff in charge of EQA Activities). While the NCHE is making concerted efforts to collaborate with professional bodies, the successful implementation of MoUs remains a challenge. The review panel was, however, informed that the Agency is planning a breakfast meeting with the CEOs of professional bodies to thrash out issues of concern (Session on the Clarification of Pending Issues).

The NCHE also participates in bilateral and multilateral agreements to facilitate recognition and equivalence of qualifications of foreign certificates in line with international standards. According to the SAR and as confirmed by the CEO and Chairperson of the Board in their interview, the NCHE has visited several regional and continental QAAs to benchmark best practices in QA. These include the Council on Higher Education in South Africa, South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Quality Councils for Trade and Occupation and the Department of Higher Education (South Africa); Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya; and the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) in Egypt. The main purpose of the learning visit to Egypt was to learn about digitalisation of accreditation processes because the NCHE intends to adopt a hybrid assessment system (Interview with CEO and Chairperson of the Board). The review panel studied the Learning Visit Reports of CUE, SAQA and NAQAAE. The NCHE is implementing a digitalisation of its assessment processes through a three-year project,

funded at a cost of US$ 117,089 by USAID, dubbed "Transforming Higher Education System (THES)" in partnership with Michigan State University (THES Project Budget, NCHE's Newsletter Vol. 3, Issue 1, October 2023).

The Agency has signed MoUs with relevant professional bodies in the country. It has also visited several regional and continental QAAs for benchmarking and is currently implementing a relevant quality assessment project in collaboration with partners outside the continent. The membership affiliations, exchange of information with the professional bodies, lessons learnt from the benchmarking visits, and collaborative project participation, enables the NCHE to incorporate best practices into its policies and procedures.

Analysis

Although the NCHE does not have an internationalisation policy, it has endeavoured to participate in national, regional and international initiatives. The review panel was satisfied that the NCHE maintains active membership in SAQAN and AQVN by being paid-up members of both networks and through involvement in the planning committee of the 6th SAQAN conference, showing the Agency's loyalty and enthusiasm to actively contribute towards the enhancement of QA in higher education in Africa and so gaining international visibility (Interview with CEO and Chairperson of the Board).

It is gratifying to the review panel that the Agency has several MoUs with relevant professional bodies in the country, with some others underway, demonstrating its willingness to collaborate with other QA bodies for improved coordination and streamlining of EQA processes. It has also visited several regional and continental QAAs for benchmarking and is currently implementing a relevant quality assessment project in collaboration with partners outside the continent. The membership affiliations, exchange of information with the professional bodies, lessons learnt from the benchmarking visits, and collaborative project participation, enable the NCHE to incorporate best practices into its policies and procedures.

The review panel learnt that implementation of some of the MoUs was a challenge and greater efforts by the parties involved were required. There is also room for the NCHE to be involved with the industry to enhance the latter's participation in its activities such as institutional/ programme reviews. Overall, the NCHE has the potential to widen its base of affiliations within the QAAs' networks in the region, continent and internationally.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE is a paid-up member of SAQAN and AQVN and undertakes regular benchmarking visits, regionally and continentally, demonstrating their eagerness to adopt/adapt good practices from their counterparts.

Recommendations

1. The NCHE should increase its visibility and participation in regional and international forums on QA activities.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should develop an internationalisation policy, with clear guidelines for effective implementation.

STANDARD 9. PERIODIC REVIEW OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

> **Standard: The QAA shall undergo periodic internal and external reviews for continuous improvement.**

Evidence

The NCHE has not undergone either internal or external periodic review since its inception. The Agency only carries out annual external audits of finances through a government approved auditor. The accounts for the NCHE Malawi, for the year ended 31st March 2024, were audited by Grant Thornton, an auditing firm. The auditor's report dwelt on the financial statements, comprising the following components: (a) Financial position of NCHE as of 31/03/2024, (b) Statements of income and expenditure, (c) Changes in funds, (d) Cash flows, and (e) Accounting policies. The outcome of the report was that it was a true and fair view of the financial position of NCHE, its financial performance and its cash flows for the year. In addition to this, the Agency has its finances and activities audited by an internal auditor. (Also see Part C S6.)

The external auditor's report does not, therefore, include the auditing of the processes, mechanisms and procedures that the NCHE evokes in its functions in assuring the quality of education of HEIs in the country. In the same vein, the outcomes from the inputs and processes are not evaluated by the external auditor. Although the SAR states that the internal auditor assesses and evaluates the activities and operations of the NCHE in line with its mandate and functions, the audit basically just includes the monitoring of financial transactions. The review panel observed that the NCHE's QA processes, procedures and outcomes have not been reviewed as per the requirement of this standard.

The NCHE has not undertaken any periodic internal nor external reviews of its QA mechanisms, processes, and procedures. The HAQAA3 initiative is the first external review that the Agency is involved in (Interviews with SAR Team, and CEO and Chairperson of the Board). However, the Agency has opportunities, through networking, collaborations and international projects to work out such reviews to evaluate the developed registration, accreditation and quality audit instruments currently in use. The Ministry Representatives were also confident that the NCHE tries to align its activities and practices with the ASG-QA through the HAQAA3 agency review. This will assist in further alignment with best practices and enhance the quality of higher education offered by the HEIs in the country.

Analysis

It is clear to the review panel from the discussions held with the NCHE-Malawi CEO, Council Chairperson, staff members and representatives from the Ministry that the Agency is strongly motivated to undergo periodic reviews in future to demonstrate its compliance with the ASG-QA. This review exercise has shown how the NCHE is determined to enhance the quality of its operations. The Agency has, therefore, fulfilled the requirement of the standard.

Conclusion

Compliant

Commendations

1. The NCHE was established in 2011 and is among the few QAAs in Africa that volunteered to be reviewed to align its processes with the ASG-QA, showing its determination to enhance the quality of its operations and for improved compatibility.

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The NCHE should continue subjecting itself to regular external reviews, preferably every five years, by regional, continental or international QA bodies for continuous improvement and alignment of its practices and activities with new advancements in higher education.

CHAPTER 5. COMMENDATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

Part B S1: The NCHE assists HEIs to mainstream their vision and mission statements in the academic programmes that they offer.

The NCHE makes concerted efforts to support HEIs in establishing IQA units and conducting capacity building workshops to strengthen the human resources in the institutions on IQA aspects.

Part B S2: The NCHE has established EQA mechanisms, guidelines and tools for assessing the quality of HEIs in the country.

The NCHE's stakeholders are involved as partners in the development and continuous improvement of its evaluation tools.

Part B S4: The NCHE appoints independent review panels based on predefined criteria.

It is mandatory for reviewers to sign no conflict-of-interest declarations to ensure the review exercise is credible.

HEIs are given the opportunity prior to the review exercise to register no-objection to proposed experts with possible conflict of interest.

Part B S5: Although the full ERR is not published, decisions on external quality reviews are published which increases the accountability aspect of the NCHE.

HEIs are given an opportunity for factual verification of draft ERRs to ensure the accuracy of the reports.

Part B S6: The NCHE has a transparent and well-structured cyclical accreditation system, which ensures that institutions and programmes undergo regular evaluations to maintain compliance with quality standards.

The Agency's commitment to transparency is evident in its accessible database of evaluation schedules and accredited institutions, which serves to engage stakeholders effectively.

The NCHE's integration of quality audits within the periodic review process highlights its dedication to fostering accountability and continuous improvement. By aligning its practices with international standards, the Agency enhances the credibility and recognition of higher education in Malawi.

Part B S7: The NCHE is commended for its proactive efforts in developing draft complaints and appeals guidelines, demonstrating its commitment to aligning, not only with the ASG-QA, but also with global QA standards.

The NCHE's professional and confidential handling of grievances, along with its active engagement with HEIs in addressing concerns, underscores its commitment to responsiveness, maintaining institutional trust, and continuously improving its QA processes.

Part C S1: The NCHE is commended for its robust legal foundation, which ensures operational autonomy and supports its extensive mandate.

The Agency's proactive efforts to engage with HEIs and regional bodies demonstrate its commitment to fostering trust and collaboration.

The NCHE's focus on aligning Malawian higher education standards with regional and international practices underscores its dedication to maintaining quality and relevance in a competitive global landscape.

Part C S2: The NCHE is commended for its clearly articulated vision and mission statements, which reflect a comprehensive approach to promoting quality, accessibility, and inclusive higher education.

The Council's strategic planning processes, including quality audits, accreditation assessments, and research, demonstrate its dedication to fostering excellence and equity.

The NCHE's role in aligning national higher education standards with international best practices enhances its credibility as a QAA.

Part C S3: The NCHE has a comprehensive governance framework, which includes a transparent appointment process for Council members and strong adherence to financial integrity standards.

The leadership provided by the CEO and executive team ensures effective execution of the Council's mandate.

The NCHE plays a leadership role as a driver of QA processes in the country that has been recognised by different stakeholders and the academic community. The NCHE has contributed to creating a QA culture at HEIs, raising awareness on the need for compliance with quality standards and accreditation.

The NCHE's ongoing engagement with stakeholders demonstrates its commitment to fostering collaboration and transparency.

The NCHE's proactive approach to strengthening governance policies, including integrity measures, showcases its commitment to ethical and accountable management.

Part C S4: The NCHE is solely responsible for approving the final outcome of its assessment activities which shows that it operates free from interference from the Ministry and other third parties.

Part C S5: The NCHE's activities and processes are conducted in a transparent manner, and they are documented and validated by stakeholders.

Part C S6: Apart from the absence of a formal IQA policy, the NCHE has other mechanisms in place, such as internal and external annual financial audits, employee and client satisfaction surveys, the IIC, etc. to evaluate its performance.

The staff are exposed to regular professional development trainings and other initiatives to enhance their qualifications and skills, especially in QA.

Part C S7:   The NCHE has its own building with the potential to expand the infrastructure to accommodate more staff in future.

The NCHE has strategies in place for generating third-stream income to supplement the government subsidy.

Part C S8:   The NCHE is a paid-up member of SAQAN and AQVN and undertakes regular benchmarking visits, regionally and continentally, demonstrating their eagerness to adopt/adapt good practices from their counterparts.

Part C S9:   The NCHE was established in 2011 and is among the few QAAs in Africa that volunteered to be reviewed to align its processes with the ASG-QA, showing its determination to enhance the quality of its operations and for improved compatibility.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Part B S1:   The NCHE should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the IQA units in the HEIs to ensure that a quality culture is truly entrenched in the institutions.

Part B S2:   The NCHE should undertake continuous follow-ups of the HEIs to ensure that there is implementation of the improvement plans developed by the institutions, for mainstreaming a continuous quality culture into the HEIs. This could include periodic progress reviews, targeted feedback sessions, and site visits to evaluate corrective actions.

Part B S3:   The NCHE should avail the SAR, and related evidence documents to review panels at least one week in advance of site visits to allow reviewers to prepare sufficiently for EQA exercises.

Part B S4:   The NCHE should widen representation of its external review panels for institutional audits, in particular, to include expertise in research, financial management, governance and management, and community engagement.

Part B S5:   The NCHE should ensure that expert panels are thoroughly trained to write comprehensive ERRs that include a description of key documents examined and clear findings and analysis of the assessment to improve the standard of reporting (see also ASG B 4).

The NCHE should identify the most adequate way to publish ERRs and to present a summary of results of EQA.

Part B S7:   The NCHE should prioritise the finalisation and approval of the draft guidelines to strengthen its complaints and appeals framework. These guidelines should then be disseminated comprehensively to all HEIs through workshops, official communications, and publication on the NCHE's website.

Part C S1:   The NCHE should prioritise the gazetting of its regulations to ensure the full operationalisation of its mandate.

Part C S6:   The NCHE should develop an IQA policy, including guidelines for implementation, to assist it to monitor and evaluate its activities in a structured manner for continuous improvement of its own internal quality assurance.

The NCHE should regularly conduct thematic analyses (produce a summary of reports), which describe and analyse the general trends in the findings of external programme accreditation and institutional reviews for possible policy direction.

The NCHE should finalise the post-accreditation evaluation form which should include evaluation questions for both the Secretariat staff who coordinate assessments (to be completed by HEIs and external review panels) as well as the external review panels (to be completed by HEIs).

Part C S7: The NCHE should develop a plan to identify the human resource needs and motivate the recruitment of more staff in the QA departments.

The NCHE should reconsider the financial structure to make it more sustainable and more balanced between revenues and expenditures.

Part C S8: The NCHE should increase its visibility and participation in regional and international forums on QA activities.

The suggested improvements are also summarised in the next section.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

Part B S2: The NCHE may consider reviewing the standards and criteria for institutional audits and those for the registration and accreditation for private HEIs to eliminate any unnecessary duplications and possible evaluation fatigue for private HEIs.

The NCHE should review the quality indicators of its evaluation tools to make them measurable and or quantifiable to eliminate unnecessary bias by reviewers of HEIs and programmes during the accreditation and quality audit processes. This will enhance transparency, fairness, and objectivity in the decision-making process of the Council.

Part B S3: The NCHE should include an interview session with representatives from the industry/ employers in its site visit schedule for programme accreditation.

Part B S4: The NCHE should include international experts in their review panels to benefit from good QA practices of different EQA systems to further enhance the quality of Malawi's higher education system.

The NCHE should include students in their review panels to raise their awareness about QA issues in higher education, to empower them and help them to take responsibility for enhancing the quality of their own education.

The completion of work on the Reviewers Management Information System should be expedited to benefit from easily accessible information of reviewers when needed.

The NCHE should customise the training/orientation programme for external reviewers by including issues pertinent to the reviews, such as scope (Minimum Standards), purpose of the review, code of conduct for reviewers, analysis of the SAR, etc., in training programmes.

Part B S5:	The NCHE could appoint a secretary for every review who can take notes and assist the chairperson to compile the ERR.
	The ERR template could be included in the Accreditation Regulations so that it is noted by all stakeholders.
	The NCHE could do a thorough benchmarking exercise of cluster accreditation procedures to learn from good practices elsewhere that can benefit their current approach to programme accreditation.
Part B S6:	The NCHE should consider publishing anonymised summaries of best practices and recurring challenges observed during evaluations to encourage peer learning and promote continuous improvement.
Part C S1:	The NCHE should conduct periodic reviews of its legislative framework to address emerging challenges and align with evolving regional and global trends. Strengthening its engagement with regional networks through collaborative initiatives and benchmarking exercises would further enhance its credibility and effectiveness.
	The NCHE should improve communication with HEIs by providing detailed guidance on its legal authority and processes to foster greater transparency and trust.
Part C S2:	The NCHE should actively promote its vision and mission through stakeholder engagements, institutional meetings, and social media channels.
	The NCHE should enhance its annual reports by including analyses of how its strategic goals are achieved and their impact on the higher education sector.
	The NCHE should foster closer collaboration with HEIs and other stakeholders in co-developing initiatives that align with its mission to strengthen collective ownership of QA efforts.
Pat C S3:	The NCHE should prioritise the integration of committee functionality into the PMS and monitoring and evaluation system to enhance governance and management. This will help ensure consistent oversight and accountability across all committees.
	The NCHE should prioritise the development of a QA MIS to improve data management, service delivery monitoring, and the overall effectiveness of operational processes.
Part C S5:	The NCHE could train HEIs on the ASG-QA to deepen their own understanding of the standards.
Part C S8:	The NCHE should develop an internationalisation policy, with clear guidelines for effective implementation.
Part C S9:	The NCHE should continue subjecting itself to regular external reviews, preferably every five years, by regional, continental or international QA bodies

for continuous improvement and alignment of its practices and activities with new advancements in higher education.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

Considering the documentary and oral evidence analysed by the review panel, the experts found, in the performance of its functions, the NCHE **is substantially compliant with the ASG-QA,** having in mind that this was the first review for the Agency against the ASG-QA that were developed in 2018. The panel found the NCHE to be compliant with ten (10) of the standards (Part B: S1, S2, S6 and Part C: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S8, and S9) as shown in Table 7.1. The NCHE is partially compliant with five (5) standards (Part B: S3, S4, S5 and Part C: S6 and S7), and non-compliant with only one (1) standard (Part B: S7).

TABLE 7.1: SUMMARY MATRIX OF JUDGEMENT

	ASG - QA	Compliant	Partially Compliant	Non-Compliant
Part B	Standard 1: Objectives of External Quality Assurance and Consideration for Internal Quality Assurance	Y		
	Standard 2: Designing External Quality Assurance Mechanisms Fit-for-Purpose	Y		
	Standard 3: Implementation Processes of External Quality Assurance		Y	
	Standard 4: Independence of Evaluation		Y	
	Standard 5: Decision and Reporting of External Quality Assurance Outcomes		Y	
	Standard 6: Periodic Review of Institutions and Programmes	Y		
	Standard 7: Complaints and Appeals			Y
Part C	Standard 1: Legal Status	Y		
	Standard 2: Vision and Mission Statement	Y		
	Standard 3: Governance and Management	Y		
	Standard 4: Independence of Quality Assurance Agency	Y		
	Standard 5: Policies, Processes and Activities	Y		
	Standard 6: Internal Quality Assurance		Y	
	Standard 7: Financial and Human Resources		Y	
	Standard 8: Benchmarking, Networking and Collaboration	Y		
	Standard 9: Periodic Review of Quality Assurance Agencies	Y		

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
1	14 November 2024 11h00-13h00 (CET/UTC+1) (120 min)	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit	-	HAQAA3 Coordinator
2	25 November 2024 11h00-12h30 (GMT+1/Belgium) (90 min)	An *online clarifications* meeting with the agency's resource person regarding the specific national/ legal context in which an agency operates, specific quality assurance system to which it belongs and key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities	-	Review Panel Chairperson
SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
		[11.12.2024] – Day 1		
3	08h00-09h00 (60 min)	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for Day 1	-	Review Panel Chairperson
4	As necessary 09h00-09h30 (30 min)	A pre-visit meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify any remaining questions after the online clarifications meeting	-	Review Panel Chairperson
	09h30-10h00 (30 min)	Review panel's private meeting	-	Review Panel Chairperson
5	10h00-10h45 (45 min)	Meeting with the CEO and the Chair of the Board (or equivalent)	*Dr Ambumulire Phiri (CEO-NCHE), Prof. Eston Sambo (Chair of Board/Council),*	Review Panel Chairperson

SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
			Rev. Fr. Dr George Buleya (Vice-Chair of Board)	
	10h45-11h15 (30 min)	Review panel's private discussion over **Refreshment Break**		All panel members
6	11h15-12h00 (45 min)	Meeting with the team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report (Chair, Vice-chair and Secretary of the drafting team + 3-5 other members)	*Dr Simeon Gwayi (Chair), Dr Japhet Bakuwa (Vice-Chair), Ms Sayda Kananji (Secretary), Mr Elias Selengo Dr Ishmael Nyirenda, Mr James Msiska, Gabriel Musa , Mrs Martha Mkandawire,*	Review Panel Chairperson
	12h00-12h15 (15 min)	Review panel's private discussion		All panel members
7	12h15-13h00 (45 min)	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team	*Dr Ambumulire Phiri (CEO) Dr Simeon Gwayi, Dr Japhet Bakuwa, Mrs Martha Mkandawire, Mr John Sadalaki*	Review Panel Chairperson
	13h00-14h00 (60 min)	**Lunch** (panel only)		
8	14h00-14h45 (45 min)	Meeting with staff in charge of external QA activities	*Dr Simeon Gwayi, Dr Japhet Bakuwa, Mr Elias Selengo, Dr Ishmael Nyirenda, Mr James Msiska, Mrs Masozi Gausi, Mr Selemani*	Review Panel Chairperson

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SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
			Mwalwimba, Mr John Sadalaki, Mr Rabson Zimba	
	14h45-15h00 (15 min)	Review panel's private discussion	-	All panel members
9	15h00-15h45 (45 min)	Meeting with the QA and Accreditation Committee of the Council	*Prof. Address Malata, Prof. Henry Mloza Banda, Prof. Emmanuel Kaunda, Prof. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Rev. Fr. Dr George Buleya, Dr Grace Chiuye, Dr E. Silumbu*	Review Panel Chairperson
10	15h45-16h45 (60 min)	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for Day 2 – **Working Refreshment Break**	-	Review Panel Chairperson
		Dinner (panel only)		
		[12.12.2024] – Day 2		
	08h00-09h00 (60 min)	Review panel's private meeting	-	Review Panel Chairperson
11	09h00-09h45 (45 min)	Meeting with the Finance and Administration Department of the Agency	*Mrs Martha Mkandawire (DoFA), Mr Ephraim Chipeta (Accountant), Mrs Lusungu Chambukira (Assistant Accountant), Mr Mphatso Chilemba (Accounts Assistant), Mrs Rabecca*	Review Panel Chairperson

SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
			Matope (CHRAO), Mr Gabriel Musa, Mr John Sadalaki, Mr Rabson Zimba, Mrs Ulemu Msiska (AAO), Ms Esmie Msendema (EA)	
	09h45-10h00 (15 min)	Review panel's private discussion	-	All panel members
12	10h00-10h45 (45 min)	Meeting with ministry representatives (Permanent Secretary/Executive Director/equivalent of the Ministry of Higher Education)	*Dr Mangani Katundu (Secretary for Education), Dr Levis Eneya (DHE), Dr Valentino Zimpita (DDHE), Dr Chomora Mikeka (DSTI), Dr Joshua Valeta (DODeL), Dr Golden Msilimba (DQAS)*	Review Panel Chairperson
	10h45-11h15 (30 min)	Review panel's private discussion over **Refreshment Break**	-	All panel members
13	11h15-12h00 (45 min)	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/HEI representatives	*Prof. Samson Sajidu (UNIMA-VC); Dr Maggie Madimbo (ABC-VC); Dr Desmond William Bikoko (President, Exploits University); Prof. Wales Singini (VC, MZUNI); Dr Robert Ridley (Unicaf University); Rev. Dr Enson Lwesya (MAGU-VC); Prof. Asiyathu Chiweza (MSG)*	Review Panel Chairperson

SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
	12h00-12h15 (15 min)	Review panel's private discussion	-	All panel members
14	12h15-13h00 (45 min)	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	*Dr Thokozani Bvumbwe (MZUNI); Dr Adamson Thengolose (MUBAS); Dr Yobe Lungu (DMI); Dr Ken Ndala (UNIMA), Dr Lucy Kululanga (KUHeS); Dr Sanned Lubani (MAU); Mrs Tawina Kasunda (ShareWorld Open University)*	Review Panel Chairperson
	13h00-14h00 (60 min)	**Lunch** (panel only)		
15	14h00-14h45 (45 min)	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool	Dr Vincent Mgoli Mwale (Luanar), Mrs Malumbo Damison (MAGU), Dr Miriam Joshua (UNIMA), Dr Mark Winter (Unicaf University), Dr Margaret Mdolo (MZUNI), Dr Ella Kangaude (MUBAS), Mrs Mary Wasiri (UNIMA), Eng. Peter Nyirenda (National Roads Auth.), Dr Patrick Mapulanga (KUHeS-LL)	Review Panel Chairperson
	14h45-15h00	Review panel's private discussion	-	All panel members

SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
	(15 min)			
16	15h00-15h45 (45 min)	Meeting with student representative councils from some reviewed HEIs (SRC president and SRC for academic affairs)	*2 LUANAR, 2 LAMAU, 2 DMI-LL, 2 University of Lilongwe, 2 Daeyang University, 2 KUHeS LL*	Review Panel Chairperson
17	15h45-16h45 (60 min)	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for Day 3 – **Working Refreshment Break**	-	Review Panel Chairperson
Dinner (panel only)				
[13.12.2024] – Day 3				
	08h00-09h00 (60 min)	Review panel's private meeting	-	Review Panel Chairperson
18	09h00-09h45 (45 min)	Meeting with professional bodies and employers	*Medical Council of Malawi (MCM), Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi (NMCM), Pharmacy and Medicines Regulatory Authority (PMRA), Civil Service Commission (CSC), Department of Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD), Teaching Service Commission (TSC), National Bank of Malawi (NBS), Employers Consultative*	Review Panel Chairperson

SESSION No.	DATE AND TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW	LEAD PANEL MEMBER
			Association of Malawi (ECAM), Ministry of Labour	
	09h45-10h15 (30 min)	Review panel's private discussion over **Refreshment Break**	-	All panel members
19	10h15-11h15 (60 min)	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	-	All panel members
20	11h15-12h15 (60 min)	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues	*Dr Ambumulire Phiri (CEO-NCHE)*	Review Panel Chairperson
21	12h15-13h00 (45 min)	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	-	Review Panel Chairperson
	13h00-14h00 (60 min)	**Lunch** (panel only)		
22	14h00-15h00 (60 min)	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings (continue)	-	Review Panel Chairperson
23	15h00-15h30 (30 min)	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	*NCHE General Management, QA staff and Board/Council Members*	Review Panel Chairperson

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

External review of the National Council for Higher Education, Malawi, by the HAQAA3 initiative

1. Background and Context

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) was established in 2011 by an Act Parliament and began its operation in 2014. NCHE is mandated to regulate both public and private higher education institutions in Malawi. Currently there are 52 universities and colleges registered by the Council. By undergoing a full agency review under HAQAA3, NCHE aims at identifying areas for quality improvement in order to serve its stakeholders better and align itself to the regional acceptable practices.

Therefore, NCHE, Malawi ("the QAA"), is applying for a review of its quality assurance practices and processes, coordinated by the HAQAA3 implementation team ("Coordinating Body"), composed of OBREAL, DAAD, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the Association of African Universities (AAU).

For this external review of NCHE, Malawi, ENQA will coordinate the practical implementation of the review and act as main contact point for the QAA and the review panel on behalf of the HAQAA3 initiative. The AAU will act as an observer throughout the process and will be allowed to access any documents and meetings in relation to the agency review to the same extent as ENQA.

The official language for the external review of NCHE, Malawi, shall be English. The agency commits to provide a translation into English for any documents related to the review (if not available already in English), as well as interpretation services during any meetings held in the context of the review if needed. Likewise, contact with the Coordinating Body shall be in English.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This review will evaluate the way in which and to what extent the QAA fulfils the African *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA).* Consequently, the review panel is expected to make a judgement on whether the agency is in compliance with the ASG-QA.

2.1 ACTIVITIES OF THE QAA WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE ASG-QA

This review will analyse all quality assurance activities of the QAA that are within the scope of the ASG-QA, i.e. reviews, spot checks, audits, evaluations, registration or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and community work/engagement).

The following activities of the QAA shall be addressed in the external review, as the QAA:

- Regulates both public and private higher education institutions in Malawi.
- Conducts institutional registration and accreditation.
- Conducts programme reviews for registration and accreditation.
- Cooperates with professional and regulatory bodies with limited jurisdiction.

3. The Review Process

The evaluation consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol/procedures for the review;
- Self-assessment by the QAA, including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- A site visit by the review panel to the QAA;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Follow-up of the review panel's recommendations by the QAA.

3.1 NOMINATION AND APPOINTMENT OF THE REVIEW PANEL

The review panel consists of four members: three quality assurance experts, including at least one from a quality assurance agency and one from a higher education institution, and a student. One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. The panel will be supported by the coordinating body who will monitor the integrity of the process.

Experts will be selected and appointed by the coordinating body, following nominations from HAQAA3 Implementing Partners and Strategic Partners. The student representative is selected from the nominations of the All-Africa Students Union (AASU).

The Coordinating Body will provide the QAA with the curriculum vitae of the potential reviewers to ensure that there are no known conflicts of interest (no objection). The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards the review of the QAA. Staff members of the Coordinating Body are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

3.2 Self-assessment by the QAA, including the preparation of the self-assessment report

The QAA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders.
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, amongst other: a description on how the self-assessment

was carried out; a brief description of the national higher education and quality assurance systems; background description of the current situation of the QAA; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; and each standard (ASG-QA part B and C) addressed individually. All quality assurance activities of the QAA will be described and their compliance with the ASG-QA analysed.

- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which the QAA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ASG-QA.

- The self-assessment report is submitted to the Coordinating Body, who has four weeks to pre-scrutinise it, before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the review panel. The Coordinating Body will not judge the content or information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the *Guidelines for the Review of African QAAs*, is present.

- For the second reviews in case the QAA already underwent a review or consultancy visit under HAQAA1 or HAQAA2, the QAA is expected to list the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations OR the QAA is expected to provide the improvement plan and/progress report of the previous review. In case the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the Coordinating Body reserves the right to reject the report and ask for a revised version within four weeks.

- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 SITE VISIT BY THE REVIEW PANEL

The schedule for the site visit will be developed by the QAA in collaboration with the Coordinating Body, to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is normally three days. The approved schedule shall be given to the QAA at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The QAA will make the necessary practical arrangements for the review panel for the duration of the site visit (including arrival information, hotel recommendations, and local transportation if needed). Exceptionally, a hybrid scenario for the remote participation of some panel members can be foreseen if duly justified.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the review panel's overall impressions but not its judgement.

3.4 PREPARATION AND COMPLETION OF THE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review panel will draft the report. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each standard of the ASG-QA.

A draft will be first submitted to the Coordinating Body who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language, and then it will be submitted to the QAA within two weeks of the site visit for comments on factual accuracy. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the comments on factual accuracy by the QAA, finalise the document and submit it to the Coordinating Body.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40-60 pages in length.

4. Follow-up process and publication of the report

The QAA will consider the report and accepts that it might be published. The QAA commits to follow up on the recommendations of the review panel.

The Coordinating Body shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the Panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in the Coordinating Body.

5. Budget

For the HAQAA3 agency reviews and consultancy visits, the direct costs (travel and accommodation for external reviewers) are covered by the HAQAA3 Initiative. However, agencies should still ensure that they have sufficient human resources for the preparation and implementation of the exercise. Likewise, any costs related to the venue for the site visit and attendance of interviewees will be covered by the agency.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on terms of reference	March 2024
Appointment of review panel members	June 2024
Self-assessment completed	September 2024
Pre-screening of SAR by Coordinating Body	September 2024
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	September 2024
Briefing of review panel members	October 2024

Review panel site visit	End November 2024
Draft of review report and submitting it to Coordinating Body for pre-screening	End January 2025
Draft of review report to the QAA	February 2025
Statement of the QAA to review panel, if necessary	March 2025
Submission of final report	April 2025
Publication of report	April 2025

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

AQVN	African Qualification Verification Network
ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CUE	Commission for University Education
CVs	Curricula Vitae
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ERR	External Review Report
HAQAA	Harmonisation, Accreditation, and Quality Assurance in African Higher Education Initiative
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEQAF	Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework
ICT	Information and communication technology
IIC	Institutional Integrity Committee
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
MAB	Malawi Accountants Board
MIS	Management Information System
MoUs	Memoranda of Understanding
NAQAAE	National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
ODeL	Open and Distance Learning
PMS	Performance Management System
QA	Quality Assurance
QAAC	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee
QAAs	Quality Assurance Agencies
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

SAQAN	Southern Africa Quality Assurance Network
SAR	Self-Assessment Report
THES	Transforming Higher Education System

ANNEX 4: DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

The SAR, including various attachments, plus additional evidence requested by the review panel provided by the NCHE before and during the site visit.

The review panel also used the following documents downloaded from the NCHE's website:

- Annual reports
- Newsletters
- List of registered institutions
- List of accredited institutions
- Press releases