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The Role of the Internal Quality Assurance Units in Continuous Improvement in Albanian Public Universities

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Abstract: Universities during their operation undertake improvement strategies to be as competitive as possible in their sector. One of the ways that universities use to develop policies and procedures as a preliminary step for continuous quality improvement is to create Internal Quality Assurance Units. Albanian Public Higher Education Institutions have officially created these units especially during the last decade, initially as a requirement regarding periodic external accreditation, but later seen as a natural necessity for continuous improvement. The focus of this research paper is to show the role of the Internal Quality Assurance Units in continuous improvement in Albanian Public Universities and for the development of their quality culture. Data from national public bodies, as well as interviews directed to the students and academic staff from Albanian Public Higher Education Institutions have been used to analyze and discuss about this topic and to give possible suggestions regarding optimizing and maximizing the work of these units to make these universities well-known and competitive nationally and as possible regionally.

Keywords: universities; higher education institutions; quality assurance and assessment; internal quality assurance unit; service quality

JEL Classification: I23, I25

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades Higher Education Institutions (HEI_s) have changed and adapted a lot, especially with the presence of greater information for all stakeholders in higher education, and in the era of artificial intelligence, with students demanding higher quality and more flexibility, and academic staff demanding different approaches and a change in culture. In this way, these HEI_s are establishing policies and procedures that respond to these changes. One of the ways that HEI_s use to develop policies and procedures as a preliminary step for continuous quality improvement is to establish Internal Quality Assurance Units ($IQAU_s$), units that play an important role in ensuring the quality and sustainability of study programs at HEI_s. Universities and other HEI_s are strengthening the need to develop a quality culture and procedures relating to quality assessment in their environments. Quality assessment (in

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addition to accreditation) is one of two components of quality assurance, and quality assessment is performed through internal evaluation (self-evaluation).

Quality assurance in HEI_s is one of the main elements of changes that have taken place, especially in some big Albanian public universities towards adapting to the requirements of the best international standards. Albanian public universities have officially established Internal Quality Assurance Units especially during the last decade, initially as a requirement related to periodic external accreditation, but later seen as a natural necessity for continuous improvement. According to the Law 80/2015 'On higher education and scientific research in HEI_s in the Republic of Albania', amended, every Higher Education Institution is responsible for its internal quality assurance, and the legal definition of Internal Quality Assurance as per article 6 (24) of Law 80/2015, amended is "the continuous process of monitoring, evaluating, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of activity in higher education institutions, carried out by the institutions themselves" (Law no.80/2015 On higher education and scientific research in HEI_s in the Republic of Albania). The standards implemented by $IQAU_s$ are chosen and set by HEI_s in accordance with the Quality Code approved by the Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) no.824/2021 'On the approval of the Higher Education Quality Code', amended, where $IQAU_s$ (with the way of functioning and structure determined by the HEI's statute) are responsible for evaluating periodically the teaching results and scientific research activities, and by conducting a questionnaire directed at students to evaluate the quality of teaching for each course/subject (usually carried out before the ending of each semester or before the exam season), and also $IQAU_s$ by conducting tracking studies to assess student employment' progress and the study programs' efficacy offered by HEI_s, and at the end the generated $IQAU_s$' evaluation reports are used as a source for external evaluation processes (i.e. accreditation) and for continuous quality improvement for these HEI_s (DCM no.824/2021 On the approval of the Higher Education Quality Code; Law no.80/2015 On higher education and scientific research in HEI_s in the Republic of Albania; QAAHE, 2026a).

In this research study Albanian public universities were taken under consideration (even though the number of non-public HEI_s is higher) because of their history and numbers compared to non-public ones, and currently, the public universities are generally more preferred by students compared to non-public ones. At table no.1 below is shown the Albanian Public HEI_s Ranking for January 2026 based in categories of Impact Rank, Openness Rank and Excellence Rank (Webometrics: Global web rankings for universities, 2026). It can be seen from this ranking of Albanian HEI_s that of the ten top-ranked HEI_s, seven of them belong to Albanian public universities.

Table 1. Albanian Public HEI_s Ranking - Webometrics Global Position: Ranking across global visibility, research excellence, openness, and academic performance - January 2026

Ranking	University
1	University of Tirana
3	University of Agriculture
4	University Aleksandër Moisiu, Durrës
5	University Ismail Qemali, Vlora
6	University of Polytechnic
8	University of Medicine
9	University Fan S. Noli, Korça
11	University Aleksandër Xhuvani, Elbasan
13	University Luigj Gurakuqi, Shkodra
20	Armed Forces Academy
23	University Eqrem Çabej, Gjirokastra
25	University of Arts

26	University of Sports

Source: Webometrics: Global web rankings for universities - 2026 (From 43 HEIs listed in total) … Authors' own elaboration

At figure no.1 below is shown the numbers of full-time and part-time employed academic staff in Albanian public universities for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, 2023-2024 [MES (Ministry of Education and Sports) - Statistics on higher education 2023-2024]. Regarding academic staff employed in Albanian public universities, from academic year 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 related to full-time academic staff there is an increase by 1.88% and about part-time academic staff a decrease by 6.68%, and from academic year 2022-2023 to 2023-2024 related to full-time academic staff there is a decrease by 2.45% and about part-time academic staff a decrease by 0.38%, changes in percentages which are considered normal for the situation and numbers presented in general by these universities.

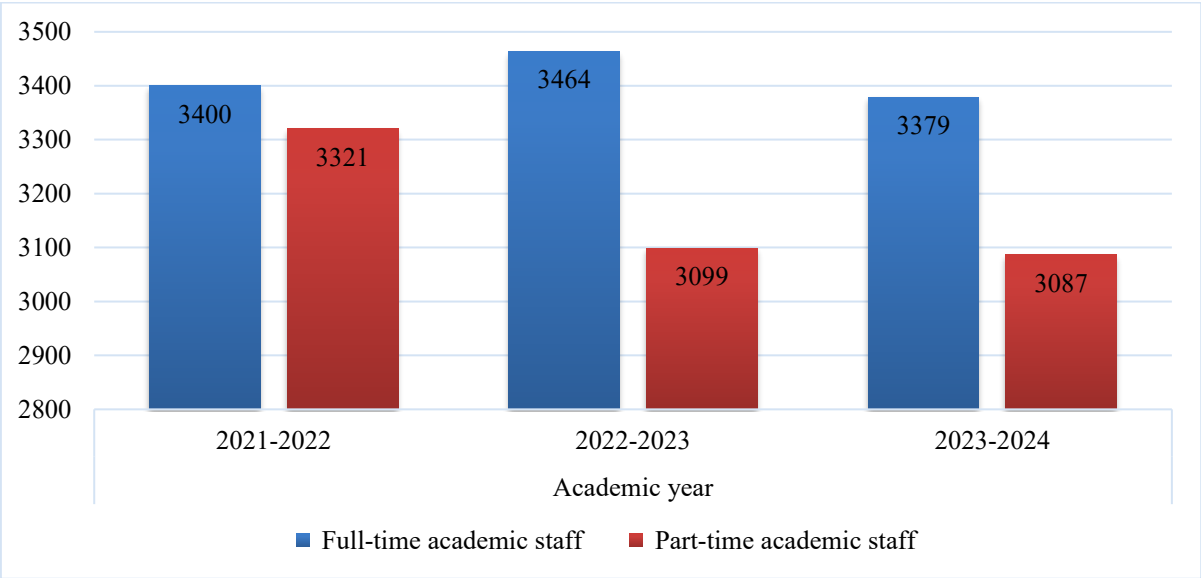

Figure 1. Full-time and part-time academic staff in Albanian public HEIs for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, 2023-2024

Source: Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) - Statistics on higher education 2023-2024

Figure no.2 below shows the number of students (in total for all level of studies: Bachelor, Master or equivalent, Doctorate, and Two-years Programs in each public university) enrolled by University, academic year 2024-2025, in Albanian Public Higher Education (total number = 86,899) (INSTAT, 2026). It can be seen that University of Tirana stands on top with 25.38% of students' enrollments in total for all levels of studies (Bachelor, Master or equivalent, Doctorate, Two-years Programs), followed by University Aleksandër Moisiu, Durrës with 18.94% of students' enrollments, and continuing by University of Polytechnic with 14.95% of students' enrollments, and so on.

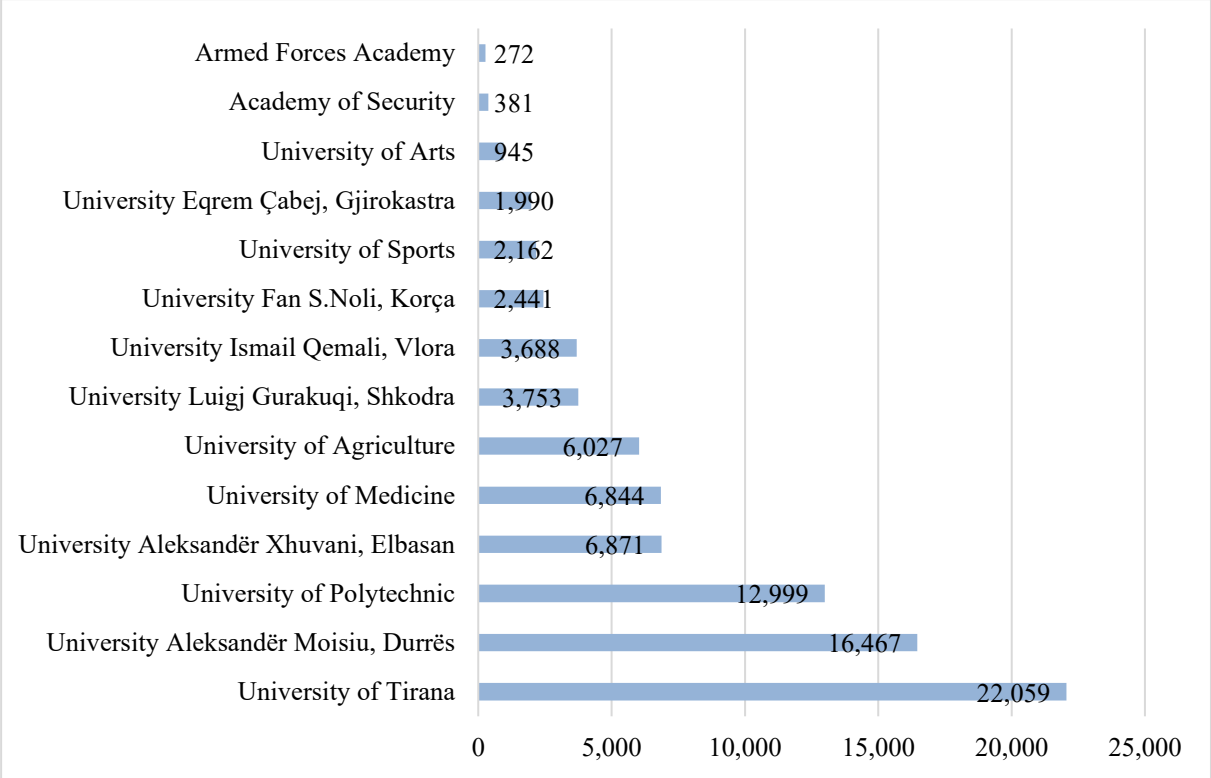

Figure 2. Students enrolled by University, academic year 2024-2025, in Albanian Public Higher Education (total number = 86,899)

Source: INSTAT, 2026

Table no.2 below shows the number of students enrolled at University by Programs, academic year 2024-2025, in Albanian Public Higher Education, in which universities are ranked based on the total number of students' enrollment at all programs: Bachelor studies, Master or equivalent, Doctorate, and Two-years Programs (total number = 86,899) (INSTAT, 2026). It can be seen that University of Tirana stands on top regarding total number of students' enrollments in Bachelor, Master or equivalent, and Doctorate studies, followed by University Aleksandër Moisiu, Durrës, which have also students' enrollments in Two-years Programs, and continuing by University of Polytechnic, and so on.

Table 2. Students enrolled at University by Programs, academic year 2024-2025, in Albanian Public Higher Education (total number = 86,899)

No. of students which follow Programs of:	Bachelor	Master or equivalent	Doctorate	Two-years Programs
University of Tirana	11,547	9,828	684	0
University Aleksandër Moisiu, Durrës	10,088	4,022	88	2,269
University of Polytechnic	9,212	3,667	120	0
University Aleksandër Xhuvani, Elbasan	3,825	2,120	36	890
University of Agriculture	3,274	2,117	127	509
University of Medicine	2,829	4,015	0	0
University Ismail Qemali, Vlora	2,295	1,219	15	159
University Luigj Gurakuqi, Shkodra	2,270	1,244	45	194
University of Sports	1,525	599	38	0
University Fan S. Noli, Korça	1,505	562	0	374

University Eqrem Çabej, Gjirokastra	909	642	0	439
University of Arts	545	334	66	0
Academy of Security	381	0	0	0
Armed Forces Academy	199	73	0	0
Total	**50,404**	**30,442**	**1,219**	**4,834**

Source: Data and figures from INSTAT, 2026 … Authors' own elaboration

The above tables and figures, provide a general picture of the Albanian Public HEIs Ranking based in Webometrics ranking (January 2026 - Webometrics Global Position) across global visibility, research excellence, openness, and academic performance, the full-time and part-time academic staff in Albanian public HEIs for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, 2023-2024, students enrolled by University and students enrolled at University by Programs for academic year 2024-2025 in Albanian Public Higher Education, which will be combined later in this research paper with the data regarding IQAUs at Albanian public universities in order to analyze and discuss in a constructive and critical way this issue and topic.

The focus of this research paper is to show the role of the Internal Quality Assurance Units in continuous improvement in Albanian Public Universities and for the development of their quality culture. Data from national public bodies, as well as interviews directed to the students and academic staff from Albanian Public Higher Education Institutions have been used to analyze, discuss and develop critical thinking regarding this topic and to give possible suggestions regarding optimizing and maximizing the work of IQAUs to make these universities competitive nationally and regionally.

2. Literature Review

Higher education institutions nowadays are facing a lot of internal and external challenges, such as constrained resources that are a result of reductions from state support, growing competition from traditional and nontraditional providers, and also many HEIs are facing a declining number of student enrollments coming from high school graduates' declines (Tandberg & Martin, 2019). Higher education institutions always face the pressure of effectivity, efficiency, and the need to keep high academic standards by focusing on internal quality assurance and external assessment (Irubor et al., 2025). Quality assurance in HEIs plays a major contribution to the continuous improvement of their educational programs and also makes them competitive in today's dynamic and ever-changing environment. Quality assurance has an impact on the ongoing development of higher education institutions, enabling them to be competitive and to respond to ongoing changes in educational demands and trends (Altbach et al., 2019). Quality itself and continuous use of quality improvement methods constitute the basis for ensuring the success of higher education institutions in the future (Qefalia & Totoni, 2012). Quality assessment is performed through internal evaluation which is often considered as self-evaluation carried out by HEIs, and on the other hand there are study programs or institutional accreditation which are external evaluations, and both internal and external evaluations are two components of quality assurance in HEIs (Qefalia, 2025). With the objective of quality assurance in HEIs by establishing strong structures and proper processes, it gives an impact in improving the quality of education offered by these higher education institutions considering the changes in this sector (Kayyali, 2023). Among the aspects of improving the quality of universities is receiving feedback from and involving two main stakeholders: students and academic staff, who play a very important role in improving the teaching process, research, curricula and study programs, and HEIs as a whole (Qefalia et al., 2012). HEIs by focusing on quality

assurance and keeping high standards, equip students with proper theoretical and practical knowledge to be the right candidates to face the challenges of the future in private companies and the public sector (Kehm & Teichler, 2020).

HEI_s use mechanisms related to internal quality assurance consisting in the establishment of institutional quality management in these HEI_s, and internal quality assurance comprises all internal systems, instruments and mechanisms that ensure HEI_s meet higher standards, as well as external requirements or accreditation (Sanyal & Martin, 2007). Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) in HEI_s refers to the procedures and policies, rules and guidelines, and mechanisms designed and implemented continuously by these HEI_s with the goals of monitoring, maintaining and improving the quality of teaching, research, and organizational services in a timely and appropriate manner (EHE Institute, 2026; Tavares et al., 2016). Introduction and establishment of a quality assurance system results in enhancements of quality culture and organizational communication and transparency, information systems and technology, responsibilities and roles in HEI_s (Vettori et al., 2017). The ongoing utilization of Internal Quality Assurance Units by HEI_s brings positive results in establishing a culture with the main focus on quality (Herminingsih & Saputra, 2025). Considering the fact that quality assurance systems serve as frameworks in enhancing the educational standards of HEI_s, these HEI_s should demonstrate their commitment to educational quality in order to attract students in each level of studies and by holding a good reputation among other organizations in this sector (Tran et al., 2023). Achieving the objective of quality assurance should be a top priority for universities in achieving high standards, national and international, and keeping good positions in university rankings (Odeh et al., 2025). The main components of an Internal Quality Assurance system are: quality policy and its integration into the strategic management process; program design and updated curricula to meet international best standards; student assessment, proper criteria used to evaluate them fairly and transparently; staff recruitment and development, staff with necessary qualifications and pedagogical skills; information systems for analyzing key performance indicators; feedback from all stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of academic programs and continuous improvement.

HEI_s based on generic standards and guidelines provided by the European Standards have the obligation of establishing internal quality management systems for assuring quality in teaching, research and organization, and based on their needs they choose the proper approaches and arrangements, and by conducting continuous internal evaluations of performance (Eurydice, 2026). To promote European cooperation related to quality assurance for HEI_s, ENQA was established in 2000 as the European Network for quality assurance in HEI_s (in 2004 became the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) with the aim of promoting the development of quality assurance in higher education by representing its members in policy-making and by supporting them and providing a forum for exchanging, developing and enhancing external quality assurance, and QAAHE (Albanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education), an associate member at ENQA, carries out analytical and comparative assessments of HEI_s, programs, and areas of study, and aims ensuring quality in HEI_s, maintaining quality standards, and promoting and improving the quality of HEI_s and their study programs (ENQA, 2026; QAAHE, 2026b). Also, related to ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area), a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in HEI_s, the main objective is to contribute to understanding the quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and for all stakeholders involved (ESG, 2015).

With the continuous changes and reforms (changes and amendments of Law, DCM, etc.) taken in Albanian public and non-public higher education institutions, especially during the last two decades, in order to adapt to the European standards under the Bologna process, quality assurance has been one of

the main elements of this reform, and increasing the need of developing a quality culture and procedures in university environments (Qefalia & Rrumbullaku, 2010). The idea of this paper is to show the role of the $IQAU_s$ in continuous improvement in Albanian Public Universities and for the establishment of their quality culture systems in order to make them successful.

3. Research Methodology

In this research paper, the methodology used consists mainly of qualitative methods, combined with quantitative research methods. As secondary sources, used information, data and figures from national government bodies and agencies such as the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports (MES), Albanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAAHE), Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), etc.) and papers from research authors focusing on internal quality assurance, quality evaluation and conformance and quality culture in higher education. The research was conducted by using electronic databases in English and Albanian, a research that was conducted until May 2026. By the authors in this paper as primary sources were used interviews directed to the students and academic staff from Albanian Public Higher Education Institutions, to analyze and develop critical thinking regarding this topic. In this study convenience sample (non-probability sample) is used, which consists in the researchers/authors selecting the easiest and most available population members to be reached from whom to get information. For the purposes of this study are used interviews with open questions, consisting in questions directed to fifty-three students (Bachelor, Master and Ph.D.) and thirty-one people from academic staff, part of Albanian public universities. Related to interviews, the authors of this paper have chosen face-to-face and semi-structured interview form considering the advantages of synchronous of time and place, making it easier in building trust and getting deep answers from interviewees, and by enabling the researchers to go deeper in achieving their research goal (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Opdenakker, 2006). Of the fifty-three students (Bachelor, Master and Ph.D.) interviewed (male, 33.96% and female, 66.04%; the ages of interviewees respectively: <22 years old, 26.42%; 22-25 years old, 60.38%; >25 years old, 13.20%), the majority of the interviewees were students pursuing BSc and Master's studies (some of them in the same time working part-time) due to their numbers, and the rest were students pursuing Ph.D. studies (most of them working in private companies or public administration), and of the thirty-one people from academic staff interviewed (male, 38.71% and female, 61.29%; the ages of interviewees respectively: <30 years old, 25.81%; 30-46 years old, 45.16%; >46 years old, 29.03%), the majority of the interviewees are in the middle age and at the peak of their experience, as well as updated with the issues and approaches related to quality assurance and conformance and especially internal quality assurance in higher education. After briefly explaining the purpose of the study, the interviewees were asked shortly about different questions and issues to give their answers and opinions based on their perception.

4. Analysis and Discussion about the Role of the Internal Quality Assurance Units in Continuous Improvement in Albanian Public Universities

Currently in Albania operate 14 public HEI_s (from which 2 are academies) (INSTAT, 2026; MES, 2025). The number of Albanian non-public HEI_s is higher compared to public universities, but in this study taken under consideration Albanian public universities because of their history and numbers compared to non-public ones, and public universities are generally more preferred by students compared to non-public ones.

In academic circles, professionals talk more about external quality assessment (or accreditation), but it can be said that everything starts with internal quality assessment. Albanian Public universities have formalized the establishment of $IQAU_s$, especially in the last 5-10 years, initially more like as a legal requirement of universities and HEI_s related to their quality assurance policies and procedures, drafting standards for quality assurance in accordance with the Quality Code, IQAUs' establishment as a legal obligation of HEI_s with the structure and functions defined in the Statutes of HEI_s (QAAHE, 2026a). Albanian Public universities usually create committees or commissions at university-level for quality-related issues, and $IQAU_s$ at faculty-level. $IQAU_s$ main duties and functions at Albanian Public Universities usually include conducting periodic evaluations of teaching and scientific research activities, assessing study programs and curricula and the effectivity of the programs offered by the HEI_s, course/subject evaluation, tracking studies to assess the students' employment progress, organizing questionnaires for students and academics staff, matching syllabi conform legal requirements, preparing periodic reports which used as a source for external evaluation (i.e. accreditation) and continuous quality improvement, etc., and in each step of these processes by collaborating with Heads of Departments and other structures of faculties by making proper suggestions.

One of the quality instruments and mechanisms is the process of managing the questionnaires (for students and academic staff), especially for students in the last week of teaching calendar/period. The main categories of student questionnaires usually include: courses and subjects, students' contribution, teaching methods, literature used, teaching quality, lecturer evaluation, logistics and technology, etc. The student questionnaire contains as well as relevant subcategories, and usually uses a Likert scale from 1-5, and at the end an open question for potential suggestions. Questionnaires have always been delivered to be completed by students, but as a process managed by $IQAU_s$ has been of recent years, and this as a legal requirement, especially by QAAHE. Questionnaires are the main input for the $IQAU_s$. The importance of student questionnaires is great considering the fact that students are the heart of the organization, in this case HEI_s. There is no HEI without students, so their opinion is critical for the progress and success of HEI_s.

Typically, IQAU is organized in such a way that one academic staff member is assigned from each department, plus one student, as well as the staff of quality administrative office, which deals with the administrative part, but different universities have different ways of organizing. IQAU members meet periodically (usually once a month) to discuss quality related issues and problems and potential improvements. There is also a questionnaire for academic staff, but in practice it is not applied in the same form as the one for students. Previously, questionnaires were physically distributed, and now it is carried out with a QR code link for ease of completion by students, and more accurate results are obtained (outputs such as Excel tables, graphics, etc.) for IQAU members who will process them.

Current issues related to this process are low completion by the students, questionnaires are considered very long with many sections and students get tired, but the good thing is the benefits from this process and IQA Unit, creating a participatory culture among key stakeholders on issues related to quality and continuous improvement, and concluding in most cases with the accreditation of BSc and Master programs for a period of 5-6 years, where 6 years is the maximum period awarded [one of the external evaluation (accreditation) categories is about IQAU and its role], for example the last decisions of Accreditation Board (at QAAHE) on 27 march 2026 concluded the accreditation of some study programs at Faculty of Economy, University of Tirana and were awarded as follows: BSc in Business Administration - 6 years, MSc in Official Statistics - 6 years, BSc in Finance & BSc in Economics & BSc in Economic Informatics - 5 years, and so on (QAAHE, 2026c). There is no ideal way of organizing $IQAU_s$ and regarding questionnaires, but the optimal one must be found.

The prediction for the future regarding the students' enrollments, especially for the Bachelor and Master systems, is not very optimistic in terms of students' enrollments, so if HEI_s face low and low numbers of students' enrollments in these study programs for some consecutive years, then the external assessment (accreditation) of these study programs would be insufficient for the survival and success of these study programs. HEI_s should continuously reinvent themselves and develop policies for quality improvement of study programs, curricula, etc. in order to be competitive in today's changing and dynamic higher education environment, and $IQAU_s$ play a crucial role related to this context.

5. Some Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the literature and interviews directed mainly to the students and academic staff from Albanian Public Higher Education Institutions, the focus of this paper was to show the role of the Internal Quality Assurance Units in continuous improvement in Albanian Public Universities and for the development of their quality culture, and also to analyze, discuss and develop critical thinking and to give possible suggestions regarding optimizing and maximizing the work of $IQAU_s$ in these universities.

Some conclusions and suggestions:

- Public HEI_s have done a lot in this regard, but the role of the $IQAU_s$ should be more proactive, and greater cooperation is needed between IQAU and other HEI structures, departments, etc. in order to create synergy for the good of all stakeholders.
- Sometimes it is perceived by some staff members that the task related to quality issues belongs only to the IQAU staff, but in fact a culture of total staff participation in quality issues should be created and embedded, and this should be ensured by encouraging those who provide feedback for potential improvements, and by receiving and reflecting on their suggestions, this will also affect the rest of the staff in the total involvement of the staff for total quality.
- More importance is given to the student questionnaire, but importance should also be given to the academic staff questionnaires (usually information or feedback from them is obtained through oral communication, or suggestions they give in meetings or through electronic forms such as email, etc., but the questionnaire form can also be used by them to anonymously provide potential and effective suggestions).
- Greater encouragement is needed for students to complete the questionnaires, and both electronic completion with QR code and physical manual completion can be combined (but each student has to fill only one questionnaire). The questionnaire should be shortened where it is possible for each category to have greater student participation in completing them. Related to the low rate of questionnaire returns, the suggested time for questionnaires is suggested to be completed two weeks before the end of the semester (i.e., not the last week), and there should be a positive campaign by Heads of Departments, the quality office and the academic staff to encourage students to complete them for their benefit.
- The same encouragement is needed for academic staff to be more proactive in providing their feedback for improving various aspects related to the teaching process, curricula, and other improvements in general, etc.

- Universities nowadays should operate with the motto of continuous improvement and adapt themselves based on the current era of artificial intelligence, changes in mentality of student generations, etc.

Future Directions of Research

An area for further study would be by conducting a comparative study between Albanian public and non-public higher education institutions by focusing on financial indicators (income from student fees, projects, inventions and innovations, etc.) and other soft indicators (non-financial, such as students' employment rates, higher numbers of students' enrollments, etc). Another area for further research would be in studying barriers and critical success factors during achieving quality excellence in Albanian higher education institutions. Also, another area for further research would be focusing on the role of ISO standards and certification and quality awards in enhancing management performance in higher education institutions.

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