

Insights and Reflections from a Collaborative Experience in Quality Assurance Audits of Academic Departments

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines the experiences and insights gained from three quality assurance (QA) audit exercises involving collaboration among an academic with a strong background in mathematics and statistics, an education specialist, and an administrator. The study aims to illuminate the complexities of QA in educational settings through interdisciplinary perspectives. An emic, qualitative approach was employed, drawing on reflective narratives derived from field notes and group discussions held during and after the audits. The paper captures the lessons learned, challenges encountered, and potential implications for future audits. It highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, preparedness, leadership stability, and institutional support structures in enhancing educational quality. The study emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary teams in QA processes and provides actionable insights for improving future audit exercises. It contributes to the literature by showcasing how diverse expertise can address the complexities of educational quality assurance and by identifying critical factors that support successful audits.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Communication Barriers, Data-Informed Decision-Making, Leadership Stability, Preparedness, Continuous Improvement, Trust-Building

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance (QA) is a systematic process to ensure that products, services, or processes meet or exceed established quality standards (Javed & Alenezi, 2023). Oo (2024) views a proactive approach, standards establishment, and continuous monitoring and improvement as fundamental elements of QA. As such, QA involves a series of activities and techniques designed to prevent defects, identify issues early, and enhance overall quality throughout the lifecycle of a product or service. A business-wise approach to QA ensures the implementation of effective QA practices that improve customer confidence, reduce costs of defects, and enhance brand reputation and overall organizational efficiency (Langas, 2022). Professionals need to develop continuously. Coincidentally, QA's goal is to promote a culture of continuous improvement. Thus, organizations can meet customer expectations and maintain competitive advantage in their respective industries in a more progressive pattern.

In education, QA is crucial for maintaining high standards and ensuring continuous improvement in all aspects that contribute to quality education (Oo, 2024). This manuscript reflects on three audit exercises undertaken by three colleagues: an academic with expertise in mathematics and statistics, a proficient education consultant with a focus on pedagogical practices, a manager who specializes in operational strategy and administrative efficiency, providing essential insights into the structural and logistical elements of departmental functioning. Experiences of these colleagues serving in the QA panels and participating in the audits enable treasured contributions into the process. They serve to grant growth opportunities while highlighting potential challenges. The study aimed to investigate the QA's efficient processes and essential elements across several academic departments (ADs) of a specific higher education institution (HEI). This HEI is in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. This manuscript explores lived experiences of specialists who participate in QA audits to emphasize the challenges and expose growth opportunities in upholding high academic standards and improving academic efficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are formal establishments dedicated to creating and delivering information and knowledge beyond the school level and provide educational programs leading to academic and vocation qualifications such as degrees, diplomas, or certificates. Their concentration is on research and advanced learning in different subject disciplines (Fedeli et al., 2024). In South Africa, HEIs (must) provide teaching and learning, research, and community engagement as core activities (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022). The proportion of these activities and those not mentioned here, as they all differ, should add up to 100%. Research HEIs provide a higher proportion of research activities, while teaching ones offer a higher proportion of teaching activities. ADs are responsible for undertaking the core education business of HEIs (Djoundourian & Shahin, 2022). As such, ADs are essential components of HEIs that provide the core business of these HEIs. They provide a specialized study, manage educational programs, support student success, and drive research initiatives (Maduforo et al., 2024). Through these functions, ADs contribute significantly to the overall mission of HEIs to educate future leaders and advance knowledge across various disciplines.

The Role of QA in Education

No individual can objectively (quality) assure themselves, at least in theory (Wawak et al., 2024). Also, giving one person a chance to conduct QA may be an injustice, as the viewpoints in interpretation should be open and unbiased. One viewpoint may lack some essential attributes of QA. A panel of experts with diverse backgrounds and experiences is ideal for QA reviews. This diversity brings new experiences to each one of the members in an each-one-teach-one setting. In education, some examples of QA include the involvement of an external reviewer or reviewer during syllabus and curriculum development (Bhambra & Johnson, 2024), a critical reader when writing study materials (Gençel & Fidan, 2024), and a moderator or external examiner during assessments (Lucander & Christenson, 2020). The drawbacks in these examples are that they are either once-off seasonal or not continuous. Quality lapses may occur during the breaks. QA is a mechanism to evaluate and enhance educational programs, ensuring they meet defined standards. It involves systematic reviews, assessments, and feedback loops that inform institutional practices.

Each-One-Teach-One QA Panel

The phrase "Each-One-Teach-One" (EOTO) originated during slavery days in the United States in African American history (Layne, 2024). Bohonos and James-Gallaway (2022) inform that enslaved black Americans were systematically denied education. In particular, the system attempted to deprive them of the ability to read and write to control and oppress them. In this context, when an enslaved person acquired literacy or other skills, Kahrl (2024) informs that such individuals made it their moral obligation to pass on that knowledge to another person. This practice promoted a culture of mutual support and empowerment among oppressed people, encapsulated in the proverb, "Each One Teach One." Over the years, according to Whitlock (2024), EOTO has transcended its historical origins to become a broader metaphor for mentorship and community responsibility. EOTO encourages individuals to share their knowledge and experiences with others. It, therefore, promotes a culture of learning and support. This attitude is reflected in various cultural expressions, including literature and community initiatives to uplift marginalized populations. As a result, EOTO has become a powerful tool of empowerment and a compelling reminder of the importance of education. It is an influential instrument for social change. Its historical roots underscore the resilience of those who fought against oppression through knowledge-sharing, while its contemporary applications highlight its relevance in today's educational and social contexts. This is how objective panels in QA reviews are used to offset instances where ulterior motives are embedded in the minds of some panel

members who may want to tarnish the images of others (Gonçalves, 2024). Moreover, EOTO is no longer limited to literacy levels. Experts share their knowledge in formal settings, such as panel members in various councils.

METHODOLOGY

The participants (Colleague A, Colleague B, and Colleague C) used a qualitative study design with an emic approach to explore their lived experiences during three ADs' QA reviews, prioritizing insider perspectives on beliefs, values, and practices (Peters, 2021). Their collaboration drew on direct involvement in QA audits. Colleague A specializes in education and pedagogy, Colleague B in mathematical sciences and data analysis, and Colleague C in biological sciences and academic leadership. Data collection involved reflective journals. Participants documented personal insights after each audit and facilitated group discussions using open-ended prompts to collaboratively explore their experiences. To ensure trustworthiness, they employed member checking, allowing review and validating interpretations, and triangulation by synthesizing data from both journals and group discussions, thereby verifying emerging themes and enhancing the credibility of their findings.

FINDINGS

Narratives of Respondents

The narratives below were collected from the three respondents.

Colleague A:

“I refer to the departmental audits that I [expert in educational] and colleagues from dissimilar subjects undertook in the university’s academic departments. I interpret the audits’ process and upshots. Audits are central to accountability. They enhance educational quality and nurture a culture of continuous improvement. My involvements with academic departmental audits offered me treasured insights into their implications for academic integrity, departmental effectiveness, and student success at Institutes of Higher Learning.

Audits scrutinize departments’ operations comprehensively. They cover curriculum effectiveness, performance, resource management and allocation, and student success outcomes. The departmental audit is systematic in identifying strengths and weaknesses. It then reveals areas requiring improvement. I made a fundamental observation that departments leverage audits as growth opportunities and not as punitive processes. This makes audits to be transformative tools.

A very important benefit of these audits is the nurturing of accountability for department and staff. If they know their work, it encourages them to continue with good teaching, learning, and research. Accountability excites the development of a culture of brilliance in the department that eventually benefits students.

Audits are data driven. Focusing on evidence-based evaluation nurtures informed decision-making in departments. For example, analysis of student performance metrics and feedback on teaching and learning enables departments to recognize patterns and apply targeted interventions to help struggling students.

Audits require teamwork from administrative and academic staff. This interface removes working in silos, promotes teamwork initiatives, and enhances communication between many parties. These collective efforts enhance innovative solutions for communal challenges.

Audits are not just for compliance. They inspire continuous improvement. Departments that use audit results upgrade their programs and services. This positive approach advances the departments, their academic programs and improves students’ experiences.

The benefits of audits are substantial but have challenges. There was huge resistance to change: some staff regarded the audits as imposition, not a growth opportunity. Besides, the time and resources for preparing for audits were intimidating. Institutions should provide adequate training, support, and awareness campaigns to ensure that audits are perceived positively.

Conclusion: *My reflection on audits in academic departments reveals an audit’s potential as a powerful tool for enhancing educational quality and institutional effectiveness. Audits can positively impact faculty and students by fostering a culture of accountability, promoting data-informed decision-making, encouraging teamwork and collaboration, and embracing continuous improvement. As Universities move forward in an ever-evolving and challenging educational landscape, audits*

must be viewed as an evaluative process and opportunity for meaningful growth and development within institutes of higher learning.”

Colleague B:

“We held QA audit sessions recently this year and late last year on our campus. During these audits, I collaborated with colleagues from many backgrounds, interdisciplinary collaboration. I saw the educational environment from multiple perspectives. This enhanced the audit process. When we started, one lesson we both agreed on was the importance of understanding the audit’s objectives. With a clearer sense of direction, we aligned our efforts and avoided redundancy. Colleague A’s educational analysis complemented my insights. It created a comprehensive picture of our educational practices. Having this clarity in mind helped the panel to make the most meaningful contributions possible. Of course, no collaboration is without its challenges. One primary difficulty we encountered was communication. In one encounter, the language of mathematical analysis often didn’t immediately resonate with the qualitative insights. These differences in approach occasionally led to misunderstandings.

We also faced resistance to the audit itself. Some faculty members viewed the process through a lens of suspicion, fearing that the audit was more about identifying flaws than about advancing improvement. This mindset made it difficult at first to gain their trust. At times, it felt like we were navigating a tense atmosphere where feedback could be perceived as criticism rather than a constructive tool for growth. However, as we continued, several vital insights began to emerge. Colleague A advocated for using evidence to drive decisions about program improvements. His emphasis on data-informed decision-making was invaluable, especially when identifying patterns and areas for change.

We learned several vital lessons that can shape future audit practices through collaboration. The first lesson was about the necessity of thorough preparation. Those involved in audits must come prepared. They should include more than understanding institutional policies and previous audit findings. However, they should be aware of the existing challenges faced by different departments. Being prepared allowed me to approach the process with confidence and a clear focus on areas of improvement.

Another important lesson was the need for trust-building. Faculty members need to trust that audits are not punitive but growth opportunities. In some cases, faculty felt compelled to present themselves defensively, emphasizing their strengths to hide perceived weaknesses. This kind of reaction is understandable, but it often delays the identification of areas that could benefit from support. As auditors, it became our role to address these concerns and help clarify that audits were designed to highlight both strengths and areas for improvement. We were not there to assign blame.

We recognized the importance of promoting a continuous improvement mindset. QA should be seen as something other than a once-a-year event but as an ongoing process integrated into the daily practices of the academic environment. The more QA can be seen as a standard, continuous process, the more likely faculty and staff will engage with it positively.

While audits are often perceived as spying exercises, we dispelled this misconception over time. In all cases, faculty saw audits as opportunities to highlight their challenges and seek the support needed to improve. This shift in mindset made the entire process more productive and aligned with the overall goal of continuous improvement.

Reflecting on our experience, there are several implications for future audits. First, the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration must be considered. Institutions should encourage auditors from various disciplines to work together, as this broadens the scope of the evaluation and provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the educational environment. Additionally, training for auditors in effective communication strategies is critical. Even though, in the end, we knew what to do, it would have been more beneficial to receive training beforehand. Improving how we convey our findings and recommendations can mitigate misunderstandings and build stronger relationships with faculty and staff.

Moving forward, institutions should focus on embedding QA into the everyday workings of academia, making it an integral part of the culture rather than an isolated event. By doing so, the quality assurance process will be better embraced by all stakeholders and lead to more sustainable improvements in education. Future research has significant potential in studying how interdisciplinary collaboration affects audit outcomes. Additionally, exploring strategies to overcome resistance to change within academic departments would be invaluable, as would tracking long-term improvements following QA interventions.

In conclusion, our collaborative journey during this QA audit has provided invaluable insights into how diverse expertise can enhance the process. By prioritizing preparation, fostering trust, and focusing on continuous improvement, we can ensure

that quality assurance remains a powerful tool for advancing educational quality in institutions. Our experience offers a model for others in academia to follow, one where collaboration, clarity, and constructive feedback lead to meaningful and lasting improvements.”

Colleague C:

“Introduction: Reflecting on my experience during the QA audits across three academic departments, I was fortunate to collaborate with Colleague A and Colleague B possessing diverse backgrounds and expertise. As an administrator with previous academic leadership experience, this collaborative process provided a multifaceted view of departmental operations, strengths, and challenges. The audits served as crucial opportunities for ensuring accountability, fostering continuous improvement, and enhancing educational quality within the institution. My insights from these audits shed light on the importance of preparedness, leadership stability, and strategic support structures.

Audit Process: The audit process was a comprehensive examination of departmental practices, including curriculum effectiveness, leadership, research output, and community engagement. Working alongside colleagues who brought quantitative and qualitative perspectives enriched the evaluations. This interdisciplinary collaboration allowed us to identify both systemic strengths and areas for improvement. A key observation I made was that departments that approached the audits as growth opportunities achieved more transformative outcomes than those who viewed them with skepticism or resistance.

Key Findings

Enhanced Accountability: Like my colleagues, I found that audits played a significant role in promoting accountability. The process of systematically evaluating teaching, learning, and research practices encouraged staff to maintain high standards. Departments that actively participated in the audits were better positioned to develop transparent, evidence-based practices that benefitted both faculty and students.

Data-Informed Decision-Making: Collaborating with colleagues like Colleague A highlighted the importance of using data to drive departmental decisions. By analyzing performance metrics and qualitative feedback, departments could identify trends, address challenges, and implement targeted improvements. This data-driven approach helped departments move beyond anecdotal evidence and adopt more strategic, outcome-focused interventions.

Teamwork, Leadership, and Communication: Interdisciplinary collaboration was a central feature of the audit process. Colleagues A, B, and I brought complementary skills and insights, which allowed us to break down siloed practices and foster better communication across departments. However, communication barriers occasionally emerge, particularly when integrating statistical analyses with narrative evaluations. Addressing these challenges requires patience, adaptability, and a commitment to shared understanding.

Leadership Stability and Preparedness: A recurring theme during the audits was the impact of leadership instability. Departments with frequent changes in leadership faced challenges in maintaining consistent strategies and effective communication. Effective transition management, professional development, and leadership induction programs are crucial for maintaining departmental direction and morale. Departments that embraced these principles demonstrated greater readiness and resilience during the audit process.

Continuous Improvement: Departments that engaged constructively with audit findings showcased a commitment to continuous improvement. Instead of viewing the audit as a one-time evaluation, these departments integrated QA practices into their regular operations. This mindset shift from compliance to growth facilitated meaningful changes in teaching practices, resource allocation, and student support services.

Challenges

Resistance to Change: Like my colleagues, I observed resistance from some faculty members who perceived the audits as a punishment rather than constructive. Building trust and clarifying the purpose of the audits as tools for growth was essential to overcoming this resistance. Transparent communication and support from leadership helped to mitigate these concerns over time.

Communication Barriers: Differences in quantitative and qualitative methodologies occasionally led to misunderstandings. For example, mathematical analyses did not always align seamlessly with narrative interpretations. Collaborative dialogue and mutual respect for each perspective were key in resolving these challenges and achieving a balanced, comprehensive evaluation.

Conclusion: *Reflecting on my collaborative experience during the QA audits, I recognize the immense value of interdisciplinary teamwork, data-informed decision-making, and effective leadership. These audits have the potential to significantly enhance educational quality by promoting accountability, improving communication, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Moving forward, institutions should prioritize leadership stability, strategic preparation, and trust-building to ensure that audits are viewed not as punitive exercises but as opportunities for growth and development.*

By embracing these principles, we can ensure that QA remains a robust tool for driving meaningful, lasting improvements in academic departments, ultimately benefiting faculty, students, and the broader academic community.”

Key Themes Identified

Thematic content analysis was used to align the data with the title and extract meaningful categories for the developed manuscript.

Purpose and Value of QA Audits

Three themes (accountability mechanism, continuous improvement, strategic direction) developed under QA purpose and value heading are accountability mechanism, continuous improvement, and strategic direction.

Theme 1.1. Accountability Mechanism

All three participants emphasized audits as instruments for ensuring accountability in teaching, research, and administrative operations.

Theme 1.2. Continuous Improvement

They agree that audits are developmental rather than punitive.

Theme 1.3. Strategic Direction

QA audits act as a direction-setting mechanism, especially in departments with leadership instability (Colleague C).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Themes relating with this heading are diverse expertise enhances rigor, mutual learning, and breaking silos: diverse expertise enhances rigor, mutual learning, breaking silos, and data-informed decision-making.

Theme 2.1. Diverse Expertise Enhances Rigor

Colleague B mentions that educational insights and mathematical analysis together enriched the audit process.

Theme 2.2. Mutual Learning

All three reflect on how collaborating across disciplines broadened their understanding and allowed for holistic evaluations.

Theme 2.3. Breaking Silos

The narratives show that interdisciplinary teamwork broke down silos and fostered integrated departmental engagement.

Data-Informed Decision-Making

Two themes (evidence-based recommendations, and targeted interventions) that emerged from the narratives evidence-based recommendations and targeted interventions.

Theme 3.1. Evidence-Based Recommendations

All the three respondents observed that the audits emphasized using both qualitative and quantitative data to guide program improvements.

Theme 3.2. Targeted Interventions

Departments used student performance and feedback data to support at-risk students and redesign curriculum (Colleague A).

Challenges in Implementation

Themes that emerged for this heading are three-fold: resistance and suspicion, communication barriers, and preparation fatigue, descry bed below.

Theme 4.1. Resistance and Suspicion

All the three respondents indicate to have observed initial defensiveness or suspicion from faculty, fearing punitive consequences.

Theme 4.2. Communication Barriers

According to the respondents, there seemed to have been differences in language and methodological orientation (quantitative vs qualitative) that led to misunderstandings (Colleagues B and C).

Theme 4.3. Preparation Fatigue

The respondents indicated that departments found audit preparation to be time-consuming, requiring more institutional support (Colleague A).

Key Enablers of a Successful Audit

The themes emerging for this subheading are three-fold: trust-building, leadership stability, and strategic preparation.

Theme 5.1. Trust-Building

Indications are that there is transparency and clarity about audit objectives that helped shift perceptions from fear to engagement, and that these audits allowed disclosure of hidden issues that may not be visible under normal circumstances. Such revelations allow for corrections where there are errors or deficiencies.

Theme 5.2. Leadership Stability

The narratives showed that though reluctance to disclose facts was shown in some departments, those departments with stable leadership were more receptive and better organized (Colleague C).

Theme 5.3. Strategic Preparation

The interviewed members from departments called for early and informed preparation as it could improve audit outcomes and review team confidence (Colleague B).

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On this heading, three themes emerged: embedding QA into culture, training needs, and further research. These are:

Theme 6.1. Embedding QA into Culture

It came out from the study that having QA culture is vital, as it was suggested that QA should not be a once-off event but an ongoing process.

Theme 6.2. Training Needs

Though there were no major issues regarding the panel members, but a few occasions indicated that there is a need for training in communication and audit methodology for panel members.

Theme 6.3. Further Research

Suggested areas include interdisciplinary collaboration outcomes and long-term effects of QA interventions (Colleague B).

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Findings

QA audits in HE encourage accountability, continuous improvement, and strategic guidance, especially in departments with unstable leadership where they development rather than criticize. They promote responsibility across teaching (and learning), research, community engagement, and administration. Interdisciplinary collaboration strengthens evaluations by encouraging mutual learning and dismantling academic silos. Data-informed decisions enable practical interventions such as curriculum redesign and student support. Challenges including staff resistance and communication barriers highlight the need for institutional support. Success depends on trust, leadership stability, and early preparation. QA implanting into institutional culture, further research on interdisciplinary and long-term impacts are essential for sustaining audit value.

Implications for Future Audits

Institutions should enhance interdisciplinary approaches by encouraging faculty collaboration across disciplines to leverage diverse perspectives, echoing Maswanku's (2024) view of synergy through diversity and inclusion. Training auditors in effective communication can reduce misunderstandings during audits, as Servidio (2024) recommends addressing communication barriers to minimize risks. Additionally, nurturing a continuous improvement culture by integrating QA into everyday academic life, compared to treating it as a one-off event, aligns with Ülker's (2023) emphasis on maintaining and regularly improving quality.

Future Research Directions

Further research should examine how interdisciplinary collaboration affects QA outcomes, develop strategies to overcome resistance to change in ADs, and conduct longitudinal studies to track improvements after QA interventions, enhancing understanding and effectiveness in QA.

Paper Novelty

This paper makes novel contributions by offering an interdisciplinary reflection on QA audits in HE, integrating insights from diverse experiences and backgrounds. It innovatively explores a qualitative method, exposing practical integration during appraisals. The study shows a shift from castigation to developmental opportunities, emphasizing trust and communication. It identifies leadership stability as a critical factor for audit success and advocates embedding QA into daily academic practices to encourage continuous improvement. The paper also provides actionable, experience-based suggestions to augment both scholarship and institutional practice.

CONCLUSION

The collaborative experience of the participants from different academic backgrounds during QA audits has yielded significant insights into the process. Institutions can enhance their quality assurance practices by embracing interdisciplinary approaches, fostering trust, and maintaining a continuous improvement mindset. This manuscript reflects on their journey, offering valuable lessons for educators and administrators involved in QA processes.

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