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a critical policy trajectory study

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAWI: A CRITICAL POLICY TRAJECTORY STUDY

WANANGWA WANYASULU NYIRENDA CHIKAZINGA

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, School of Education

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) reforms within the current policy trajectory of constructing knowledge-based economies occupy a central place in higher education policy globally. Yet research literature shows that it is both a theoretical and practical challenge to develop and implement an effective QA system for higher education especially where QA reforms are informed by global imperatives such that globally the search for the most satisfying QA system was ongoing. This critical education policy study aimed to explore and understand how the national QA system for higher education in Malawi that emerged with the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in 2011 had been developed within the globalising environment of QA reform; how it was being implemented; and the influence it was having on practices within universities.

A qualitative case study methodology was deployed where NCHE was the primary case study and principal focus of investigation. This was supported by three secondary case studies of a private university and two public university colleges to provide more insights on the influence of the QA system. Data were obtained from documentary evidence and interviews with forty (n=40) participants comprising national policymakers, senior university managers, academic unit managers and academic staff across the case universities. A modified policy trajectory framework that accounted for the multi-scalar (local, national, regional and global) dimension of QA reforms, state-centred constraints and the dynamic two-way interaction of structure and agency guided the collection, analysis and interpretation of data.

The study argues that the problems of QA and management in higher education cannot be solved by identifying the ‘right’ QA system design and methodology or adjusting the strategy as premised on technical rationality and functionality perspectives, even though important this might be in achieving strategic ends. Rather, this also requires attending to the link between the QA reform and the political context in which specific QA methodologies are constructed. The evidence supports this argument by showing that the nature of the policy development processes including who was involved and the power dynamics at play had significant implications on the ensuing QA system design and methodologies, which eventually affected the implementation and overall impact of the QA system. The study concluded that the key principle of having the national QA system and external QA agency responsible for regulating higher education in Malawi was not the problem. But policy actors had problems with how the design of the QA system was conceptualised, the standards that were developed and how the system was being implemented. The implication was that instead of denying the political nature of QA, it was better to accept claims by scholars such as Michael Skolnik that QA in higher education “is a socially constructed domain of power and design QA systems in a way that is appropriate for a political process”.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This PhD dissertation is dedicated to my son Walinase Takhorwa and daughter Wazgora Tabitha Chikazinga. The dissertation is a product of a long journey and could not have been realised without the blend of friendship, support and guidance of several people, which sustained me throughout the exciting and trying times of my journey. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Professor Bruce MacFarlane, my first supervisor during the first three years for his guidance which helped to improve the design of this study and for believing in my potential. I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Dr Lisa Lucas for the invaluable scholarly advice, expert guidance and unwavering mentoring and support throughout my PhD journey. From her I have learnt far more than the nitty-gritty of doctoral research. I have also gained insights into the academia art of how to inspire, cultivate and mentor postgraduate students. I am equally grateful to Dr. David Sands who stepped in as my second supervisor in the final stage when Professor Bruce MacFarlane left the university, for his scholarly advice, encouragement and support.

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Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Wanangwa W.N. Chikazinga DATE: 14th December 2022

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

COM	College of Medicine
DHE	Directorate of Higher Education
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEODeL	Higher Education Open and Distance E-Learning
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
KCN	Kamuzu College of Nursing
KI	Key Informant
KuHES	Kamuzu University of Health Sciences
MGDS	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
MOEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
MUST	Malawi University of Science and Technology
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
NESIP	National Education Sector Investment Plan
NESP	National Education Sector Plan
NPM	New Public Management
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NTWG	National Technical Working Group
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
QA	Quality Assurance
QAD	Quality Assurance Director
QAM	Quality Assurance Manager
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADC-RQF	SADC Regional Qualifications Framework
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIMA	University of Malawi

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Chapter One
Introduction and background to the study

1.0. Introduction

This critical education policy research study focused on quality assurance in higher education as a policy domain. Quality assurance (henceforth QA) today occupies a central place in higher education policy globally (El-Khawas, 2013). Yet research literature reveal that it is both a theoretical and practical challenge to develop and implement an effective QA system for higher education especially where QA reforms are informed by global imperatives (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Harvey & Williams, 2010). The complexity of QA reform fundamentally relates to the nature of QA as both a technical and political process (Beerkens, 2015; Skolnik, 2010). Whilst the evaluative aspect of QA aims to produce technically valid assessments, such evaluations often are associated with competition for resources, conflict over status and power over decisions about whose values and interest should dominate (Harman, 2001). Moreover, QA requires making choices among competing conceptions of quality and approaches to QA with different purposes and philosophies and in doing so privileges some interests over others (Skolnik, 2010). While some scholars (Beerkens, 2015; Filippakou, 2017; Kauko, Takala, & Rinne, 2018) have called attention to the political nature of QA, much scholarly work has focused on the technical rather than political dimension of QA by examining QA system designs, methodologies and their impact.

This study primarily focused on the political dimension of QA by exploring how the national QA system for higher education in Malawi had been developed; the stakeholders that were involved in policy processes, the power dynamics at play and the implications of policy development processes on implementation and outcomes or effects of the QA system. The study was framed within the context of globalization given that it is no longer feasible to think of the nation state as the sole container of education policy making (Mundy, et al., 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Antoni Verger, et al., 2018). With contemporary global transformations and increasing interdependence of national, regional (transnational) and global (supranational) governance of higher education (Salmi & Bassett, 2010), it has become inevitable for nation states when developing QA systems to look 'outward' towards supranational and transnational entities and to other countries for prevailing norms and practices and 'inward' towards national practices (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011;

Ozga & Jones, 2006). It has been argued that instead of examining traditional questions about policy source and target, global and local convergence and divergence, education policy studies should focus on how the practices are translated and enacted in specific national settings to ensure they are implementable and effective (Ball, 1998; Kauko et al., 2018). The study therefore also examined the influence of the constellation of actors and policy discourses at global, regional and national/local dimension of action and the extent the QA models and frameworks from elsewhere were translated, recontextualized and enacted in the specific context of Malawi.

The main argument (thesis) of this study is that the problems of QA and management in higher education cannot be solved by identifying the 'right' methodology or adjusting the strategy as premised on technical-rational perspectives, even though this is important for achieving strategic ends. Rather, this also requires attending to the link between the QA reform and the political context in which specific QA methodologies are constructed. The evidence of the study supports this argument by showing that the nature of policy development processes including who is involved and the power dynamics at play have significant implications on the ensuing QA system design and methodologies, which eventually affect implementation and consequently the overall impact of the QA system. The study concludes by supporting Skolnik (2010) that "rather than denying the political nature of QA, it is better to accept that QA in higher education is a socially constructed domain of power" and design QA systems, methodologies and procedures "in a way that is appropriate for a political process" (p. 1). In what follows, I provide the background and rationale for the study, the aim, objectives and research questions, an overview of theoretical framework and methodology and summary of the thesis chapters.

1.1. Background to the QA system study

The global policy trajectory of constructing knowledge-based economies has made higher education more important than ever in both developed and developing nations (Bernhard, 2011; Teferra, 2013). There is consensus that the generation, dissemination and use of knowledge; the primary responsibility of higher education has become a key factor to national development and global competitiveness, even more important than physical capital (Bloom, Canning, Chan, & Luca, 2014; Pillay, 2011; World Bank, 2009). This has put countries across the globe under heavy pressure to regulate and improve the quality of their higher education systems. The Malawi Growth

and Development Strategy (MGDS) III also prioritizes improving quality of education as one of the three government' strategic objectives in higher education aimed to promote socio-economic development and the country's competition in the global economy (Government of Malawi, 2017).

The global trend since the 1980s is that the historical collegial approaches to QA embedded in the university values of professionalism and trust have given way to new structures and approaches to QA operating at the national level (Dill, 2010) reinforced by several international organizations, (i.e. UNESCO, The World Bank, OECD and European Commission). This has resulted in the establishment of transnational and national QA agencies to be responsible for assuring the quality of higher education systems. In line with this trend, QA in Africa has evolved in several phases from affiliation to European universities to mentorship of new universities by European universities and older African universities to the most recent times when countries have focused on establishing national QA agencies (Hayward, 2006; Materu, 2007; Nabaho, Aguti, Oonyu, 2017). El-khawas (2013) observed that nowadays national QA agencies have been given formal authority by national governments to regulate and monitor higher education in most countries. Zapp & Ramirez (2019) indicated that already back in 2016, there were about 467 recognized QA and Accreditation bodies in 175 countries. The eight regions of the world had a regional qualifications framework while six of the regions also had a revised Regional Convention for Recognition of higher education Qualifications. The 'global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications' was finalized and adopted by UNESCO in 2019. These authors concluded that the 'global higher education regime' has emerged with QA and Accreditation, Qualifications Frameworks and Recognition Conventions as the substantive cornerstones (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019). Thus, despite the lack of consensus over the concept of quality, formal ('explicit and systematized') QA systems have become indispensable in higher education policy and discourse, forming the central component of reform for adapting "higher education institutions to the increasing expectations from both internal and external stakeholders across the world" (Kahsay, 2012, p. 18). The 'quality revolution' in higher education (Newton, 2010) has underscored the expectation that universities must demonstrate that they are providing quality education and always strive to improve it (Anderson, 2006).

1.2. The national QA system for higher education in Malawi

The national QA system for higher education in Malawi emerged with the enactment of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 (Government of Malawi, 2011). This provided the legal framework for the QA system and established the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) as the national QA agency responsible for regulating both the national QA system and higher education. NCHE started operating in 2013 and since then it has developed QA standards and frameworks and conducted the first cycle of assessment and accreditation of public and private higher education institutions and their programmes. This provided the primary impetus to conduct the study. It should be mentioned that NCHE is in its infancy, the development of operational frameworks for the national QA system was an ongoing process that continued beyond the period of this study. NCHE was at the time of this study guided by and/or had developed the following policy instruments:

- NCHE Act of Parliament Number 15 of 2011.
- Standards and Guidelines for QA in Malawi's higher education institutions.
- Standards for Accreditation of higher education institutions in Malawi.
- Minimum Standards for higher education institutions in Malawi.
- Accreditation and Evaluation Framework and Assessment Form for HEIs.
- Template for programme curriculum development and course/module specification.
- Library standards for higher education
- Higher Education Open and Distance E-Learning (ODeL) Framework
- Higher Education Qualification Framework (Draft)

NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 enacted by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) and the QA standards and frameworks developed by NCHE collectively constituted an 'ensemble' of policy instruments steering the higher education system in Malawi. These policy 'texts' were considered as both 'political acts' and 'textual intervention' in practice (Gale, 1999) and formed the central point of analysis of the policy processes for the development and implementation of the national QA system and its outcomes or effects. The study took a macro (system) level analysis of the QA system for higher education with NCHE as the principle focus of investigation. It was difficult, if not impossible to focus on NCHE without considering the response of higher education institutions (HEIs). Whilst NCHE is responsible for regulating QA in the Malawian higher

education sector, its functions are largely considered based on circumstances that prevail at the micro-level in HEIs. As a result, three HEIs: one private university and two public university colleges were included in this study to provide 'views from below' and maximize what could be learnt about the development and implementation of the national QA system as well as the influence that the national QA system procedures were having within universities.

1.3. Rationale for the study

The motivation and rationale to undertake the study was informed by several issues. First was the concern raised in literature about the theoretical and practical difficulty of developing and implementing formal QA systems (Becket, & Brookes, 2008). It is only an effective national QA system that can significantly contribute to improving quality and relevance of education, thus enabling universities to play a more effective role in any country's economy (Pilly, 2011). Beerkens (2015) and Dill (2020) claimed that although formal QA systems in Europe have undergone continual change and adaption over the last twenty nine years and evolved into their current form, most 'of the key tensions and dilemmas' persist. A review of fifteen years of 'quality in higher education', observed that questions related to its purpose, effectiveness and costs emerge regularly, underscoring the ongoing search for the most appropriate QA system globally (Harvey & Williams 2010).

Secondly, formal QA systems for higher education is a recent phenomenon in African countries, Malawi inclusive (Materu, 2007). As a result, it is not well researched and documented in the context of developing countries. A search of QA literature for Malawi revealed that very few studies (Mambo, et al, 2016; Msiska, 2016; Shawa, 2007, 2014) have been conducted and none of these studies focused on the development of the national QA system regulated by NCHE, since at the time these studies were conducted, NCHE was not yet fully operational. Only one study (Kajawo & Dong, 2020) explored accreditation issues in selected private universities in Malawi. The dominant claim in literature was that the development of QA policies in many developing countries of Africa and Asia is heavily influenced by empirical research and QA models in the US and Europe, although the extent to which the imported models from Western countries are effective to the specific context of developing countries varies greatly such that in some cases it has proved unsuccessful (Shah & Do, 2017). Luckett (2007) observed in South Africa that those involved in

QA were typically overwhelmed that they rarely engaged in methodological debate. Rather they adopted a common sense approach to QA in which tried and tested models were imported 'uncritically' from one context to another. Schindler, et al (2015) and Nabaho, et al (2017) echoed the need for QA approaches to be informed by context-specific rather than isomorphic-driven QA methodologies, supporting Kalayci, et al (2012) that within the quality discourse, evidence from various jurisdictions point 'to the effect that a 'one-size-fits all' approach to' QA was likely to fail. It was therefore necessary to examine how the QA system had been shaped by global and local imperatives and how it had been reconstructed to meet the Malawian context, while attempting to generate contextual empirically based evidence that could support further development.

Thirdly, despite that QA agencies and their procedures are widely recognized and respected internationally, it is not universally accepted that the adoption of formal QA systems has produced desirable effects in HEIs (Aamodt, et al, 2018; Cardoso, et al, 2016). While some argue despite the problems, the net effect has been positive, others contend that formal QA systems do not produce substantial and long lasting effects on enhancing quality of education apart from instilling bureaucratic requirements and diverting institutions from core activities (Newton, 2010; Saarinen, 2010). The direction for reform is that development of QA systems in higher education requires finding the right balance between improvement of quality and accountability (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Westerheijden, et al, 2014). Whilst I support this view, my contention is that it is more important to focus on the link between the QA system and the politics that surrounds the policy processes in which specific QA methods are constructed. This could bring enlightenment to empower academics to participate in policy processes and drive the quality enhancement agenda. This is particularly important as Dill (2020) observed that "because of reservations about the effectiveness of externally oriented QA mechanisms, a number of countries in Europe are now experimenting with internally oriented reforms of a university's own collegial processes for assuring academic quality" (p.45).

Finally, the creation of formal QA systems for higher education by nation states or governments appears to be "one of the most demanding and intrusive policy interventions that universities have to deal with" (Chikazinga 2019, p. 4). The literature showed that the legitimacy of national QA agencies, their roles or functions and QA mechanisms were in several jurisdictions readily

questioned and in the extreme cases resisted or rejected (El-khawas, 2013; Lucas, 2014; Salto, 2018). A case was reported in Malawi where a private university dragged NCHE to the Malawi high court and won the case after losing its accreditation status during NCHE's 2018 assessment of universities. It was argued that the minister of education had not published in the gazette the NCHE board of directors/council members as required by law (Galafa, 2018). Given that much scholarly work informed by technical-rational assumptions seek to justify rather than problematize QA systems, resistance is often described as a practical difficulty requiring a remedy instead of a social phenomenon requiring critical inquiry and explanation (Okoche, 2017; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Attending to the 'politics' of QA was necessary to understand how actors at the micro-level within HEIs work with the national QA system procedures (Saarinen, 2010).

1.4. Study objectives and research questions

1.4.1. Aim of study

The study aimed to understand the policy processes for the development of the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi, the parties that were involved, the power dynamics at play and the implications of such processes on the QA system implementation and outcomes or effects.

1.4.2. Study objectives

The above aim was translated into five objectives:

- To examine the external (global) and internal (national) factors that influenced the emergence of the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi.
- To analyse the processes of the production of QA system texts or instruments for regulating QA and the higher education sector in Malawi.
- To examine how the national QA system operates to assure the quality of higher education in Malawi.
- To explore the influences of the national QA system and procedures on practices within universities.
- To conduct a fine-grain analysis of the behavior responses of universities to the national QA regime and the implementation gap.

1.4.3. Research questions

To achieve the aim and objectives of the study, the 'grand' research questions which the study sought to answer was formulated as follows:

- *How has the national QA system for higher education in Malawi been developed amidst a rapidly globalizing QA policy reform environment and how does it operate to assure the quality of higher education nationally and at institutional level?*

A policy trajectory study approach (Ball 1994, 2006) was adopted by exploring the research questions beginning with the gestation of the QA system reform, production of policy instruments to concerns with issues of implementation and outcome or effects. The modified policy trajectory framework framed the operationalization of the 'grand' research question for the study into five specific research questions and provided the analytical and conceptual tools for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data by examining four loosely connected policy contexts of the development trajectory of the QA system for higher education in Malawi:

Context of influence	1. *What external (global) and internal (national) factors influenced the need for the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi to be identified, justified and placed onto the government policy agenda?*
Context of policy text production	2. *What are the key characteristics of the policy texts relating to the national QA system for higher education in Malawi and how were they produced?*
Context of practice or implementation	3. *How does the national QA system coordinated by NCHE operate to assure quality of higher education in Malawi?*
Context of policy outcome or effects	4. *What has been the influence of the national QA system and procedures on practices within the universities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation?* 5. *How do higher education institutions in Malawi respond to the QA mechanism and what structural factors constitute the implementation gap?*

1.5. Overview of the methodological framing

This education policy research of the QA system for higher education in Malawi was located within the domain of critical policy studies, which allows going beyond technical-rational assumptions of policy to examine the political and ideological dimension of policymaking processes (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The study was conducted as a qualitative case study

framed by the critical philosophical paradigm of research. Based on Habermas (1971) framing of critical social sciences, the methodological approach of the study combined explanation, interpretive understanding and critique, by integrating theory and empirical evidence to interpret social meaning and evaluate actions. The modified policy trajectory framework that considers the impact of globalization on QA system reforms, state-centred constraints, the dynamic two-way interaction of structure and agency, and incorporates various conceptual tools to illuminate the different aspects reflected by each of the five-research questions guided the collection, analysis and interpretation of data for the study.

The study used the multiple case study design drawing evidence through interviews and document analysis at global/international, regional and national level using the primary case study of NCHE and at micro-level within universities through secondary case studies of three HEIs. Policy network theory embedded within the modified trajectory framework situated the case study of NCHE within the global context, allowing to track dominant actors (individuals and organizations) that directly and in-directly influenced the development of the QA system for higher education in Malawi. In total, 40 interviews were conducted, and a large range of documents were analyzed. Participants were government officials (Ministry of education and NCHE) and university senior managers, middle academic managers and academic staff. Multiple case studies alleviated the limitations of a single case study, allowing potential variations, contradictions and difference to be explored between and across cases thereby providing analytical gains and richness to the investigation of the QA system.

1.6. Organization and outline of thesis chapters

The thesis is organized in eleven chapters. The other chapters are as follows:

Chapter two *Globalization and policymaking in higher education and the national policy context in Malawi,* examines the global and national policy contexts that shape higher education policy and systems and the tension and conflicts that influence the tradeoffs in the policy design adopted by a country. It also discusses the Malawi higher education system. The chapter shows that globalization impact on QA system reforms by reconstituting the nation state education polity and propagating dominant ideological and social imaginaries in which reforms are framed by policymakers. The national policy environment for Malawi provided both opportunities and

constraints to public policy making. There were issues of general inclusiveness of government policy processes; capacity of government agencies to steer policy making and dependency on technical experts from international agencies.

Chapter three *Quality assurance in higher education: the contested policy domain* comprises a theoretical and empirical review of literature on QA as a policy domain. It deals with trends that necessitate the development of formal QA systems in higher education globally. It also examines the political nature of QA in higher education. It begins with debates about the conceptualization of quality and its assurance. Then proceeds to discuss the ideas about values and ways of thinking that influences approaches to QA. It outlines arguments on tension between the accountability oriented external QA and improvement oriented internal QA and discusses alternative QA approaches and policy instruments in higher education. It also discusses the debates about policy actors and their involvement in policy processes including the role of QA agencies. Finally major issues related to the implementation of QA systems are explicated.

Chapter four *Theoretical and analytical framework for the study of higher education QA system reform in Malawi,* outlines the theoretical and analytical framework for the study. It is argued that the complexity and scope of the study precluded any possibility of successful single theory explanation. The chapter begins with a critical review of Critical theory by Jurgen Habermas that provide the overall theoretical framing for the critical policy analysis approach of the study and deliberative policymaking expected of Malawi as a democratic state. Then outlines the conceptualization of policy as 'texts', 'discourse' and 'the authoritative allocation of values'. Finally it explicates and critiques the policy trajectory framework (Ball, 1994, 2006; Bowe, et al., 1992) then demonstrates how the modified framework that integrates diverse analytical and conceptual tool was used in the study.

Chapter five *Research methodology* describes the methodological aspects of the study. A justification to locate the study within the critical or transformative paradigm and adopt the qualitative research tradition is presented. The choice and rationale of case study methodology is described including an explication of the multiple case study design and how it was deployed. The research methods and procedural issues are discussed including, purposive sampling, pilot study

and data collection methods particularly, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The data analysis technique adopted for the study namely: thematic analysis and content analysis are examined, followed by a reflection on ethical issues and measures undertaken to ensure quality and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter six '*Inside' the context of influence: QA system agenda for higher education in Malawi,* covers results of the study for research question one. It reveals the complex ways in which global, regional and national constellation of actors, structural dynamics and policy discourses interacted to influence the QA system agenda for higher education in Malawi. This comprises discussion on the: global/regional context of influence; national/local context of influences; and problematization and issue framing on the government decision agenda.

Chapter Seven, *Development of policy instruments for the state regulatory regime and QA system for higher education in Malawi,* provide results of the study for research question two. It reveals different approaches and processes that were followed in the development of the QA system and key policy actors that were involved, drawing insight on the 'who' and 'how' of policy production and the premise of rationality and inherent tensions. It also uses Campbell (2004) concepts of 'translation' and 'bricolage' to examine the extent the development of the QA system instruments was mutually informed by global and national/local practices.

Chapter Eight, '*The NCHE hits the ground': implementation of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi* present results for research question three. It explicates how the national QA system regulated by NCHE operates to assure quality of higher education in Malawi, by reflecting on five structural elements linked to implementation of the national QA system framed by Perellon (2001, 2007) (i.e. QA system design; Purposes; QA control body; Functions, procedures and processes; and use of QA information) and how they were interpreted by various actor and carried out in practice by attending to agential interpretation and enactment emphasized by Ball (1994).

Chapter Nine: *Influences of the National QA system procedures on the higher education sector and practices within universities,* covers results for research question four. It examines the first

order effects, that is changes in practices or structures (and the lack thereof) resulting from the national QA system procedures after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation by NCHE.

Chapter Ten: *Unveiling the micro-politics of the national QA system reform and implementation gap,* provide results of the study for research question five. This constitute a fine-grained account of the different ways the national QA system had been perceived and responded to by actors within universities and the structural factors that hinder the successful implementation of QA system. Teelken (2012, 2015) theorisation of university actors three coping mechanism: 'symbolic compliance', 'professional pragmatism' and 'formal instrumentality' is used to provide a critical explanation of university actors response to the QA system mechanisms.

Chapter Eleven: *Conclusion of the study*, explicates the summary of key findings of the study, contribution of the study, limitations and suggestions for further research; and finally, recommendation for policy and practice are made based on the findings of the study.

Chapter Two

Globalization and policymaking in higher education and the national policy context in Malawi.

2.0. Introduction

This chapter examines the global and national policy contexts that shape higher education policy and systems and the tension and conflicts that influence the tradeoffs in the policy design adopted by a country. It also discusses the Malawi higher education system. It is argued that policy study cannot be adequately conducted without understanding the policymaking contexts. Higher education systems today are characterized by 'de-nationalization'. Nation states lose their monopoly on the control of higher education while at the same time, policies are mooted in supranational spaces shaped by factors beyond national borders. The study of QA as a policy domain requires an understanding of this dynamic interrelationship between the global and national policymaking contexts. Thus, I first discuss how globalization impacts on QA reforms by reconstituting the nation state education polity and propagating the dominant ideological and social imaginary in which reforms are framed by policymakers and its implication for this study. Then I examine the national contextual factors underpinning the public policy making environment in Malawi and finally discuss the Malawian higher education system.

2.1.Globalizing context of quality assurance in higher education

2.1.1. Globalization

Globalization is a complex and highly contested concept (Zajda, 2015). Scholars define the concept from different angles (Castellls, 1996; Held & McGrew, 2003). Put simply, it refers to a set of processes that in various ways intensify supranational connections in political, economic and cultural domains (S. Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). The insights on debate about the impact of globalization can be drawn from three schools of thought (Held & McGrew, 2003; Tikly, 2001). H*yperglobalists* advance the convergence thesis and believe global political and economic changes outstrip the capacity of nation states to contest or resist change. *Sceptics* argue that globalization is a myth. What prevails is increasing regionalisation. Nation states are not passive victims, but architects of change. The *transformationalist,* view globalization as the major driving force behind rapid political, social, economic, cultural and technological changes. The nation state

retain legal claim to sovereignty, but its political authority and functions are reconstituted and shared within a network of supranational (global), transnational (regional), national and local authorities (Held & McGrew, 2003). The transformationalist approach was important to pursue in this study, given that it recognizes the complexity and lack of uniformity of the impact of globalization on different nations (Tikly, 2001) and that the extent to which QA policies are mutually informed by global and local factors is highly contested (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019).

2.1.2. Globalization and higher education policy

Higher education policies are largely framed by global imperatives (Mundy et al., 2016; Antoni Verger et al., 2018). Vidovich (2002) observed that the emergence of QA systems in higher education in many countries was attributed to the global political, economic and ideological shift of the 1980s. However, to understand the impact of globalization on policymaking, we need to know how its 'ideological packaging' affect education policy around the world (Zajda & Rust 2009). As Mok (2007) contended, "globalization enters the education sector on an ideological horse and its effects are largely a product of ideology" (p 307). Education policy scholars agree that globalization impact education reforms by altering structural conditions and propagating the dominant ideological and social imaginary in which reforms are perceived and framed by policymakers (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Robertson, 2009; Antoni Verger et al., 2018). Neoliberalism and the discourse of 'knowledge-based economy' were identified in literature as the dominant global policy discourses that shape QA policy reforms.

2.1.2.1. Neoliberal ideology

Neoliberalism or 'the ideology of the market' is the dominant political and economic ideology that frames many of the higher education reform ideas that circulate around the world (Ball, 1998). Neoliberalism constitute the global 'policy paradigm', that is "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of problems they are meant to be addressed by nation states" (P. Hall, 1993 p. 279).

Harvey (2005) described neoliberalism as a political and economic theory premised on 'liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by

strong private property rights, free market and free trade' as the best way of advancing society. He further asserted that neoliberalism gained prominence in the 1980 as an antithesis to Keynesian (Welfare State) system and a move towards privatisation, consumerism, market deregulation and free trade. Lucal (2015) observed that neoliberalism constitutes three intertwined dimensions: a political and economic ideology of free market and consumerism; a mode of governance (decentralization); and public policy package based on deregulation, liberalization of trade and privatisation. While it is possible to identify several variants of neoliberalism (Olssen, Codd, & O'neill, 2004), they all seem to unite on three broad tenets: benevolence of the free market; minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy; and the individual as a rational economic actor (S. Hall, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberal ideology defines the individual as *homo economicus*, a rational economic actor and assumes that 'the social domain like the economic one' is regulated by the 'rational choices' of entrepreneurial individuals (customer) who perceive whatever they do 'in terms of maximising their human capital' (Baez, cited in Sanders, 2011, p. 20). To that end, the neoliberal state "focuses on enabling individuals as economic actors but not on social welfare for the citizenry as a whole" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 20). Neoliberal ideology fundamentally values the free market as an ethic and seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market (D. Harvey, 2007). The market is seen as the inherently efficient governing mechanism of the economy and every aspect of society (S. Hall, 2011). Thus, neoliberalism restricts state interference in the economy. The role of the state is redefined and limited to creating the legal structures and functions required to guarantee the proper functioning of the market and quality. The notion of 'minimalist' state extend to how neoliberalism changes the way individual states manage the public sector (Mok, 2007a). The state is forced to adopt 'performativity' as the control mechanism. This is a form of indirect steering or steering at a distance, which replaces direct state intervention with performative technologies such as target setting, auditing and quality management, borrowed from the corporate world (Ball, 1998).

As the neoliberal ideology has become dominant, commercialization, marketization and commodification, as well as the extension of market logic and the prioritization of economic outcomes have come to redefine the purpose and role of social, cultural and political institutions

(D. Harvey, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). For example, neoliberalism posits two broad assumptions related to higher education with the market at the core: that higher education should compete freely in a globalised education market, and that institutions should produce highly trained graduates predisposed to compete in a global market (Olssen & Peters, 2005). This neoliberal view, subject education to both *commodification* (turning social goods and education outcomes into tradable commodities) and *marketization*, where market principles are used to drive efficiency through competition in non-market (public) institutions (Yorke & Vidovich, 2016). The university is compelled to model its goals and strategies on the entrepreneurial business model and embrace corporate ethos of efficiency, accountability and profit-driven managerialism. The new 'entrepreneurial' university succumbs to the economic gains which seem to be offered by the neoliberal ideology (Zajda & Rust, 2009).

2.1.2.2.Discourse of knowledge economy

Globalization and the competitive market forces have generated growth in knowledge industries which have redefined the labour demands of the global market (Zajda, 2015). The concept of 'knowledge based economy' has become a potent policy condensation that frames the preference of a broad range of actors and guide the way they intervene in society (Antoni Verger et al., 2018). Dale (2005) argued that "the discourse of knowledge economy represents a particularly strong version of globalization" (p. 117). Lingard & Ozga, (2007) considered the discourse of the knowledge economy as the most globalized policy discourse that circulate without any reference to context but influences education policy around the world. Robertson (2008, 2009) observed that the knowledge economy discourse has powerful material effects noting that the World Bank and OECD both develop and legitimate the discourse and use it to structure global education policy agendas that member states follow.

Robertson (2008) analysis of the genealogy of the knowledge economy demonstrated in various ways how the discourse of knowledge-based economy represents a fundamental and qualitative shift from policy prescriptions of the 1990s. The knowledge economy is informed by New Growth Theory developed by Romer (1981) and his colleagues, which proposed endogenous factors such as knowledge and technological base (quality learning, research and innovation) and its distribution to the wider population as crucial to development (Godin, 2006). In short, the

knowledge economy relies primarily on the use of ideas rather than physical abilities and on the application of technology rather than exploitation of cheap labour and is predicated on four fundamental elements: “human capital, new technology, innovation and enterprise dynamics” (Robertson 2008, p. 7). It is argued that human capital requirements of flexibility, creativity, innovation and adaptability are the ones higher education must now deliver and that such qualities are best acquired in deregulated university systems in which ‘business is embedded, competition is enhanced and the entrepreneurial habitus developed’ (World Bank, 2002). The quest for competitiveness in the global market imply the growing demands for better quality higher education increasingly address the imperative of the global knowledge economy discourses (Zajda & Rust, 2009).

Kandiko (2010) observed that neoliberal ideology and underlying ideas of global reforms tend to infiltrate the minds of nation states policy makers to the point that it becomes internalised and normalised as the ‘policy paradigm’ for linking local practices to global reforms. Mok (2007b) argued that policy makers also make use of globalizing discourses as a justification for shaping domestic political and policy agendas and legitimating policy reforms. Cloetes et al., (2006) demonstrated that such global reform ideologies and agendas fundamentally challenge specific conditions of nation states and higher education. For example, they explained:

> “According to the underlying ideas and assumptions of global reform thinking, universities and colleges should be externally controlled; their activities should be formally evaluated; they should be held accountable for their performance; they should be steered by market forces and not by governmental and or state mechanism; they should be run by professionals leaders and managers instead of by academic *primus-inter-pares* (first among equals); and they should be included as service industries in regional and global trade agreements” (Cloetes et al., 2006, p. 9).

Cloetes et al., (2006) further claimed that nation states accept and apply these global dominant reform ideologies and the assumptions that underpin them and consequently downplaying the importance of specific national and institutional contextual factors. Zajda & Rust (2009) contended that globalization conceals competing discourses and argued that education reforms espousing neoliberal ideologies tend to produce a great deal of discontent and conflict. With techno-science and entrepreneurial values enjoying a new legitimacy, the critical voice of the university is more stifled rather than strengthened (Zajda, 2015). The humanistic and social values are weakened as

neoliberalism re-define education and training as investment in tradable knowledge and skills (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014a). This calls for the need to reflect whether global discourses are taken for granted or significantly contextualized to enhance policy reform (Mok, 2007b).

2.1.2.3.Re-scaling of QA politics and policymaking

Globalization forces have led to the 're-scaling' of education polity and policymaking (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009, 2011). Dale (2005) described the phenomenon as the move towards multi-layered and 'pluri-scalar' policy and decision making involving a network of organizations and agencies beyond the nation state. Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor (2005) differentiated between 'international' (relationships between nations), 'transnational' (across national boundaries) and 'global' (supranational) networks. That is nation states have the authority to develop higher education policies but such policies are now enacted within the global system around a common set of assumptions and political rationalities (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

The impact of 'supranational' (global) and 'transnational' (regional) polity has been evident in the development of national QA systems for higher education since the 1990s. It is argued that contemporary global transformations such as the global market for higher education have brought challenges that cannot be addressed by any individual country alone, but require interdependence of national, regional and global governance(Salmi & Bassett, 2010; Uvalic-Trumbic, 2010). As a result, internationalized QA standards and frameworks and what is termed 'best practices' are increasingly developed and enacted in supranational policy spaces. There are international guidelines for good practice (GGP) for external quality agencies (INQAAHE, 2016) and guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education(UNESCO/OECD, 2005). The eight regions of the world (Table 1) have regional qualification frameworks, while five of the regions have revised international conventions for recognition of qualifications (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019). The global convention on recognition of higher education qualification was finalized by UNESCO and adopted in 2019 (UNESCO, 2019). Zapp & Ramirez (2019) concluded that the 'global higher education regime' has emerged with quality assurance and accreditation; qualifications frameworks; and recognition conventions as the substantive cornerstones.

Table 1: Regional qualifications frameworks (QF) and international conventions for recognition of higher education qualifications

Regional Qualifications Frameworks		**Year**	**No. of Countries**
1	Southern African Development Community QF	1997	15
2	Pacific QF	2001	15
3	European QF	2008	25
4	Transnational QF for the virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth	2010	32
5	Caribbean QF	2012	15
6	Association of Southeast Asia National Framework	2012	10
7	Regional Higher Education Framework for East Africa	2015	6
8	The Gulf QF	2015	6
Conventions for Recognition of Higher education Qualifications		**Year**	**No. of Countries**
1	Latin America and the Caribbean –Regional Recognition convention	1974	17
2	Mediterranean Region –Inter-Regional Recognition Convention	1976	12
3	Arab States –Regional Recognition Convention	1978	18
4	Europe –Regional Recognition Convention	1979	33
5	African States –Arusha Regional Recognition Convention	1981	29
6	Asia and the Pacific –Regional Recognition Convention	1983	21
7	European Regional Convention –Lisbon Recognition Convention*	1997	53
8	Catania Declaration on the Euro-Mediterranean Area of Higher Education and Research*	2006	13
9	EU-Latin America-Caribbean Research and Higher Education Area*	2008	EU (53) +30
10	Asia-Pacific Regional Convention*	2011	9
11	African States – Revised Addis Regional Convention*	2014	17

Source: Zapp and Ramirez, 2019, p. 485; UNESCO, 2016

The Bologna Process in Europe is a well-known manifestation of how the transnational (regional) polity has been potent in shaping QA systems reform in individual countries within the region (Woldegiorgis, 2018). The Bologna Process is an initiative by European countries to harmonize the systems of higher education in the region. The stated intention was to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, that would help to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Since 1999, the

European Union through the Bologna Process has successively developed QA and accreditation standards and procedures; qualification frameworks and adopted the 1997 Lisbon regional convention on recognition of qualifications that have triggered a chain of national-level reforms in 48 signatory European member states higher education systems (Corsier & Parveva, 2013).

Many scholars provide evidence of similar developments in other world regions such as Africa, Asia-Pacific, South-East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America (Chou & Ravinet, 2016; Corsier & Parveva, 2013; Hahn & Teferra, 2014; Vogtle, 2010; Zgaga, 2006). Kotecha (2009) observed that in the context of Africa, this has entailed wider continental (African Union) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) efforts. There are efforts by the African Union since the mid-2000 to develop the Pan-African QA and accreditation framework and the African higher education and research space (AHERS) along the lines of the Bologna Process (Hahn & Teferra, 2014; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2019). The regionalisation response to the realities of globalization is thought to contribute to development of national QA systems in Africa (Mhlanga, 2012; Sehoole & De Wit, 2014; Woldegiorgis, 2017). As a result, QA reforms are spreading rapidly across national boundaries representing a significant form of policy borrowing and learning (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014; Woldegiorgis, 2018).

The implication is that when developing QA systems, nation states look both *'outward'* towards supranational and transnational entities as well as to other countries perceived to be succeeding for prevailing norms and practices and *'inward'* towards national practices (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011). Ozga & Jones (2006) and Lingard & Ozga (2007) distinguished between 'travelling policy' which reflect the common agenda, standards and policy models of supranational/transnational groupings, and 'embedded policy' which is found at the national level where supranational/transnational agendas and models are mediated by local contextual factors that may translate policy to reflect more locally defined policy antecedents and priorities. The point was that when policy makers attempt to adopt or adapt global policy models to a country, the process of translation and recontextualization in the realization or enactment of policy in specific national and local settings must also be addressed (Ball, 1998).

However, nation states across the world do not experience the impact of globalization in a uniform manner and tend to have varying potential to absorb, modify and resist global elements (Marginson, 2010). This is particularly true for developing countries which are not only the object of more intense flow of external pressure from the large presence of external agencies (international organizations, NGOs and donor agencies) but also depend on hindered capacity to mediate global policy pressure (Antoni Verger et al., 2018; William, 2009). There is evidence of the dynamic two-way interaction between supranational and national level in most European countries, such that both homogenization (increasingly similarities) and heterogenization (context-specific differences) can be observed in QA policy direction due to the strong role institutions play in shaping national responses to supranational policy processes (Morley, 2003; Vidovich, 2004). At the same time the challenges of translating supranational QA models to the national contexts within universities are acknowledged (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014).

Shah & Do (2017) noted that the development of QA policies implemented in developing countries of Asia had been heavily influenced by the Western quality arrangements. However the extent to which the borrowing of such framework and models from Western countries were effective varied greatly amongst Asian higher education systems such that in some cases it had proved unsuccessful. Mhlanga (2008) in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana demonstrated that institutions mainly placed priority on aligning their QA policies and systems with international standards at the expense of exploring new initiatives informed by contextual imperatives and institutional peculiarities. Kauko, Takala, & Rinne (2018) argued that we need to take account simultaneously of global complexity and contingency. Instead of examining traditional questions about policy sources and targets, global and local convergence and divergence, there is need to understand how through their presence and collaboration in global QA policy networks actors contribute to the de-localization and re-location of policies. The development of the QA system in Malawi was viewed through this globalization lens to draw attention to the process of 'translation' and re-contextualization, the extent to which the ultimate QA standards, procedures and instruments could be understood as mutually informed by global and local practices and how this impacted the implementation of the QA system.

2.2.The national setting: Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, which shares a common border with Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia. Formally Nyasaland, Malawi was under British rule from 1891 as British Central Africa Protectorate, then incorporated into the Central African Federation (Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland) in 1953 until it was dissolved in 1963 (Lange, 1973). The country gained independence from British colonial rule on 6th July 1964 and transitioned to one-party autocratic rule lasting thirty years under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and in 1993 adopted a democratic system of government (Holland, 2010).

Malawi is densely populated with 17.6 million people living within 118 484 square kilometres of land out of which a fifth contains water. The population is ‘youthful’ with 51 percent under the age of 17, and only 4 percent above 65 years (National Statistical Office, 2019). This creates the daunting demand for higher education and excessive pressure on the labour market (Mussa, 2013). Malawi is among the world’s least developing countries, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of only US$ 6.3 billion and GDP per capita of US$338.5 in 2017 (World Bank, 2017). The economy is heavily dependent on agriculture on which 85% of the population derive its livelihood(World Bank, 2018). Apart from agriculture, the economy is predominantly dependent on foreign aid (Bastoe, 2017). The country’s colonial history and dependence on foreign aid has had major implications on the development of the higher education system and national development plans and policies.

2.2.1. National policy making context

Drawing on the foregone account and as can be expected, during the one-party state, the political system was ‘closed’. Policy making was a top-down technocratic process centralized in the office of the president and cabinet (Barnett, 2018; Chirwa & Chinsinga, 2015; Fozzard & Simwaka, 2002). While there is a view that the quality of policies and the capacity of the government to develop polices was unparalleled (Booth et al., 2006; Anders, 2009; Cammack, 2011), the top-down design and technical approach to government policy formulation and implementation provided little opportunity for local participation.

The transition to multi-party democracy represented a fundamental change in the nature of politics and public policy processes by opening up the political system and dispersing power to various public and private institutions including citizens (Svåsand, 2011). At the same time, the transition was considered by many public policy scholars as the tipping point in terms of the capacity of the Malawi government to formulate and implement technically sound policies (Booth et al., 2006; Rakner, Mukubvu, Ngwira, & Smiddy, 2004; Svåsand, 2011). Chirwa & Chinsinga (2015, p. 5) claimed the main challenge for Malawi was that government policy making processes are essentially driven and underpinned by the 'neo-patrimonial logic'. This meant that formal institutions of the state are informally captured by patronage and clientelist networks (Cammack, 2007, 2012). Booth et al., (2006) and Tostensen (2017) found that this disempowers and corrupts the civil service, progressively undermining the capacity to generate coherent and technically grounded policy approaches. However, we cannot assume that this might have affected the development of the national QA system legal frameworks and and policy instruments for higher education.

Tostensen (2017) faulted Malawi's' presidential political system, which confers the presidency enormous powers of appointment to a wide range of senior positions in government and its agencies without viable systems of checks and balances. Chirwa & Chinsinga (2015) interpreted the enduring legacy of the strong presidency as a huge impediment to subjecting policy-making processes to the influence of a diverse range of stakeholders so that they become more participatory, transparent and accountable. Chingaipe & Msukwa (2012) observed that in general the inclusiveness of government policy processes had remained marginal due to the persistent top-down technical approaches to policy making. The authors demonstrated that consultation processes undertaken by bureaucratic policy makers did not afford stakeholders enough latitude to influence the content of policies. It was mostly tokenistic and served to legitimate decisions that have already been taken. This purely technocratic style of policy making presented a huge obstacle to public scrutiny of policy decisions, yet scrutiny of this nature has potential to improve the policy design.

Bastoe (2017) discerned weak government leadership capacity to drive policy processes as another challenge that can affect the quality of public policy making. Bastoe (2017) reported that

government policies in Malawi are largely formulated on an ad hoc basis and the processes often tend be chaotic due to the absence of a central government agency responsible for providing leadership for policy reform initiatives. When a key government agency is tasked to coordinate policy making in some sector, they are either weakly staffed and/or without requisite depth of technical expertise. This combined with the dependence on foreign aid provide room for multilateral and bilateral aid agencies to take advantage of the weak government technical capacity in different sectors to dominate government policy processes (Chinsinga, 2007). The implication is that their competing views, interest and demands potentially subject policy making to polarized ideological learning and orientations, which can be a major challenge to develop contextually relevant policies. As Ball (1998) argued, local policy actors should not simply adopt foreign policy models but must engage in the continuous process of intermediation and contextualization to generate contextually relevant policies. This issue was explored in the context of the development of QA system for higher education in chapter seven.

2.2.2. Higher education in Malawi

A brief history of the establishment of the first university is necessary to understand the current system of higher education in Malawi. The history of higher education in Malawi begun when the country attained independence from British colonial rule in 1964 (Lange, 1973). The British Inter-University Council on Higher Education Oversees and American Council on Education were engaged by the Malawi government to conduct a survey on the education needs of the country. The study "recommended the establishment of the first university in the country" (Kadzamira, 2018, p. 1262) and provided the model of the university, which blended aspects of the American and British higher education systems (Holland, 2010).

Malawi established its first university, the University of Malawi (UNIMA) by October 1964 under the University of Malawi (provisional) Act to offer degree programmes at Chancellor College. In 1967 four tertiary institutions offering certificates and diplomas courses in engineering, agriculture, public administration and education were incorporated into the expanded UNIMA comprising five constituent colleges namely: Chancellor College, Soche Hill College of Education, the Polytechnic and Institute of Public Administration, which were all based in Blantyre and Bunda College of Agriculture based in Lilongwe (Lange, 1973). Notably, the University adopted a unified

structure that brought together all forms of tertiary education at the time ranging from lower-level crafts courses to fully-fledged degree programmes. This unique model emerged in the early 1960s out of economic and historical consideration (Shawa, 2007; World Bank, 1978).

In 1973, Chancellor College which had three faculties of Science, Humanities and Social Sciences was moved to a purposely-built campus in Zomba together with the Institute of Public Administration and the College of Education converted to separate faculty of Law and Administration and faculty of education (Kadzamira, 2018). This led to three constituent colleges: Chancellor College in Zomba, The Malawi Polytechnic in Blantyre, and Bunda College of Agriculture in Lilongwe. The opening of Kamuzu College of Nursing in Lilongwe in 1979 and College of Medicine in Blantyre in 1991 gave the University of Malawi five constituent colleges. Whilst most pre-independence African Universities were affiliated to the University of London in order to maintain international standards (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996), the University of Malawi was not affiliated with any international university, but employed highly qualified expatriate (foreign) lecturers and among others adopted the British external examiner system to maintain standards (Holland, 2010).

2.2.2.1.The current system of higher education

The current system of higher education in Malawi consist of public and private higher education institutions (Mambo et al., 2016). The system has diversified and is characterised by various types, including universities, institutes and colleges offering university certificate, diploma and degree programmes. Whilst most universities have the legal power to develop their own programmes and award their own degrees, only a few colleges offering university diploma and degrees have such power, but most of these institutions are affiliated to universities with degree awarding legal powers.

The country currently has six public universities (Table 2). Beginning in 2011, the government engaged in a process of unbundling the University of Malawi to expand higher education and improve efficient management of the increasingly complex constituent colleges. This turned the five constituent colleges into four independent public universities. The oldest since 1964 is Chancellor College, which retained the name University of Malawi. The Lilongwe University of

Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) which until 2011 was Bunda College of Agriculture opened in 2012. The Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MuBAS), formerly The Polytechnic was established in 2021. Likewise, Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KuHES) opened in 2021, when the government merged College of Medicine and Kamuzu College of Nursing. The other universities are: Mzuzu University (MZUNI) established in 1997 and the Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST), which opened in 2014, bringing the overall total to six. There are currently four non-university public HIEs that have upgraded and offer degree programmes namely: Malawi College of Accountancy (MCA) established in 1980, Domasi College of Education dating back to 1993, Nalikule College of Education (NCE) opened in 2016 and the Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) established in 1989 (Kadzamira, 2018).

Table 2: Public universities and other HEIs offering degree programmes in Malawi.

	Public Universities/Colleges	**Year Established**
1	University of Malawi (UNIMA)	1964
2	Mzuzu University (MZUNI)	1999
3	Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR)	2011
4	Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST)	2012
5	Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MuBAS)	2021
6	Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KuHES)	2021
5	Malawi College of Accountancy (MCA)	1980
6	Malawi Institute of Management (MIM)	1989
7	Domasi College of Education (DCE)	1993
8	Nalikule College of Education (NCE)	2016

As of September 2020, there were twenty-eight private universities/colleges (Table 3) including four notable private universities (African Bible College, University of Livingstonia; Catholic University; Malawi Adventist University) established some three decades ago, six within the past decade, and the remaining eighteen that have been established over the past nine years. Thirteen were accredited, while the rest were registered and at various stages of accreditation process with the regulatory agency. These institutions like their public counterparts, offer a variety of certificate, diploma and degree programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level (Kadzamira, 2018).

Table 3: Private universities in Malawi: Year established, status and ownership

	Institution	Year	Status	Ownership
1	African Bible College (ABC)	1989	Accredited	Religious Organization
2	University of Livingstonia (UNILIA)	2003	"	Religious Organization
3	Catholic University of Malawi (CUNIMA)	2006	"	Religious Organization
4	Malawi Adventist University (MAU)	2007	"	Religious Organization
5	DMI-ST. John the Baptist University	2010	"	Religious Organization
6	DAEYANG University (DU)	2010	"	Religious Organization
7	Exploits University (EU)	2010	"	Business Corporation
8	Nkhoma University (NKHUNI)	2011	"	Religious Organization
9	Malawi Assemblies of God University (MAGU)	2013	"	Religious Organization
10	University of Lilongwe	2015	"	Business Corporation
11	Pentecostal Life University (PLU)	2013	"	Religious Organization
12	Management College of Southern Africa (online)	1995	"	Business Corporation
13	Millennium University	2016	"	Business Corporation
14	Share world Open University Malawi	1994	Registered	Business Corporation
15	St. John of God College of Health Sciences	2003	"	Religious Organization
16	Blantyre International University (BIU)	2008	"	Business Corporation
17	UNICAF University	2015	"	Business Corporation
18	Lake Malawi Anglican University	2015	"	Religious Organization
19	Skyway University	2012	"	Business Corporation
20	Jubilee University	2017	"	Business Corporation
21	University of Blantyre Synod	2017	"	Religious Organization
22	Zomba Theological College	1977	"	Religious Organization
23	Evangelical Bible College of Malawi	2000	"	Religious Organization
24	International Online University	-	"	Business Corporation
25	African University of Academics, Research and Entrepreneurship (AUARE)	-	"	Business Corporation
26	Marble Hill University	2019	"	Business Corporation
27	International College of Business and Management (ICBM)	2002	"	Business Corporation
28	University of Hebron	2020	"	Business Corporation

Source: NCHE (2019).

Public universities in Malawi are established by an Act of Parliament, “which prescribes the governance structures consisting of the governing University Council, Senate as the highest academic body, faculties, and Academic Departments” (Kadzamira 2018, p. 1263). The institutions largely depend on public funding which constitute 80% of the total expenditure while the remaining 20% emanates from tuition fees and other sources (Valeta, Sefasi, & Kalizang ’oma, 2016). Private universities on the other hand, are established by charters and accredited by the government. They operate as for-profit institutions whether owned by religious organizations or business corporations. Private universities draw most of the income from student fees apart from the direct funding by individual enterprises and religious organizations which own them (Msiska, 2016).

The HE system in Malawi is guided by policy prescriptions in the National Education Sector Plan (NESIP) that draws from the medium term framework, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III 2017-22) with three policy goals of enhancing higher education (1) access and equity, (2) quality and relevance (3) governance and management (Government of Malawi, 2017; MoEST, 2008, 2020). However, the system remains small compared to other countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. In spite of government efforts to increase access, Malawi’s HE system participation rate of 0.8% (Government of Malawi, 2017) is among the lowest in the World and SADC region (Mambo et al., 2016). Participation rates in most SADC countries ranges between 2% and 4% dropping to 2.2% in Lesotho and 4.9% in Swaziland and rising to 15% for South Africa, Botswana and Cape Verde and 26% for Mauritius (Chivwara, 2013; Teferra, 2014). NCHE official documents indicated that currently less than 30% of eligible students are selected to public universities in Malawi due to lack of capacity to absorb majority of eligible candidates. While private universities are playing an important role in improving access to higher education in Malawi evident by the increase in enrollment of 88.4% between 2008 and 2011, accompanied by a concurrent increase of 33.7% in public universities over the same period, most students are enrolled in public universities despite having many private universities than public institutions. The contribution of private universities has been negligible accounting for about 12.4% of the total higher education enrolment in 2011(Mambo et al., 2016). This confirmed Teferra (2013) observation that African HE faces complex challenges as countries endeavors to expand access while concurrently struggling to maintain quality.

The Ministry of Education, science and technology (MoEST) is responsible for the overall governance and management of the entire education sector. The Directorate of Higher Education (DHE) was created as an independent directorate in the Ministry of Education in 2009 with the core function of managing policies in the higher education sub-sector and facilitating legislation of relevant governing tools (Kalizang'oma, 2016). The DHE has facilitated the creation of governing and regulatory bodies in the higher education sector. NCHE was established in 2011 to regulate quality assurance and accreditation. The Higher Education Student Loans and Grants Board (HESLGB) was established in 2015, replacing the various unsuccessful loan schemes introduced since 1985 to reduce public expenditure on hitherto free tuition fees and complement NCHE's role by disbursing loans to "students in both accredited public and private universities who satisfy the criteria and recover loans from all former beneficiaries of the scheme to ensure the financial viability of the Board" (Kadzamira, 2018, p. 1265). The National Qualification Framework (NQF) is being developed to link qualifications from all education sub-sectors, and the National Qualification Authority (NQA) Bill has been drafted to establish the NQA Board that would regulate the implementation of the NQF (Kalizang'oma, 2016).

2.3.Conclusion

This chapter has shown that globalization impact on QA system reforms by reconstituting the nation state education polity and propagating the dominant ideological and social imaginary in which reforms are framed by policymakers. It has been argued that QA frameworks are now mooted in supranational policy spaces. The implication is that an education policy study should focus on how global policy discourses and QA frameworks are translated and re-contextualized in the enactment of QA systems in specific national settings. The national policy environment for Malawi provides both opportunities and constraints to public policy making. There are issues of general inclusiveness of government policy processes; capacity of government agencies to steer policy making and the dependency on technical expertise from international agencies. The study sought to understand how the QA system was enacted within such a policy context and the extent to which the QA standards and procedures could be understood as mutually informed by global and local practices.

Chapter Three

Quality assurance in higher education: The contested policy domain

3.0. Introduction

This chapter reviews literature on QA as a policy domain. Most of the literature is based on studies from elsewhere since in Malawi, few studies have been published in this area. The review aimed to identify research gaps and draw theoretical insights that shaped the analytical tools for the study. The main argument herein is that except for few studies, much of the scholarly work has focused on the 'technical' rather than the 'political' dimension of QA by examining QA methodologies and their impact. There is a need to attend to the political dimension that influences policymaking processes. The chapter is organized in two key dimensions: the factors that trigger development of formal QA systems and the political nature of QA. The latter is covered under three broad areas linked to the policy domain (1) conceptualization of quality and QA; (2) stakeholder participation in development of QA systems and (3) the QA system's major implementation issues.

3.1. Factors that trigger development of QA systems

Chapter two mentioned that QA systems for higher education emerges out of the synergy between objective changes in higher education and broad paradigmatic changes (Beerkens, 2015), mostly linked to the dynamics of globalization (Maringe and Foskelt, 2010). Insights can be drawn on these changes and the way different countries have responded globally (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Marginson, 2016b; Teferra, 2014; Varghese & Martin, 2013). The most significant factors within which formal QA systems appear to have emerged especially in developing countries are: massification, funding patterns, privatization of higher education, changing role of the state, the drive towards new public management (NPM) and accountability, role of international organizations, and cross-border higher education.

3.1.1. Massification

The rapid expansion of enrolment in HE systems – *massification* has become a global phenomenon (Marginson, 2016a), and major catalyst for most policy changes in higher education (Altbach, et al., 2009). Martin Trow's (2005) revised typology predicted growth of HE systems from 'elite' with a gross enrollment ratio (GER) of 15%, to 'mass' (between 16 and 50%) and to 'universal'

systems above 50%. On the basis of this classification, higher education is already universalized in most parts of Europe and North America, enrolling about 80% and has massified in the majority of Latin America and Asian countries, which enroll between 25% and 50% (UNESCO, UIS, 2019). Although Sub-Sahara Africa still educates less than 10%, the actual numerical enrollment has expanded dramatically in many countries over the past few decades (Mohamedbhai 2014; Teferra, 2014). Similarly, the total enrollment in public higher education in Malawi (exclusive of other tertiary institutions) increased considerably from 90 in 1964 to over 30, 516 in 2017 (Kadzamira, 2018).

The rapid expansion of higher education has been both in terms of numbers and diversity of students and academic institutions. This has been attributed to factors such as the growing demand for labour force with advanced knowledge and skills required in modern knowledge-based economies (Akalu, 2014; Bloom et al., 2014); the burgeoning numbers of students from lower levels of education and those who are already employed but want to improve their qualifications (Mohamedbhai, 2014; Teferra, 2014) and the democratization of higher education as a social justice agenda (Huang, 2012; Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Globally, the 'logic' of massification implicates tension between higher education as a public versus private good, widens access to a growing segment of non-traditional students, differentiates in types of institutions, varies the patterns of funding and is generally responsible for the potential decline of quality and the overall lowering of standards of education in universities (Marginson, 2018).

3.1.2. Funding

Prior to the 1980s, higher education in Africa has been deeply reliant on public funding with governments financing tuition-free public university to all eligible students without regard to their capacity to pay, and the subsidy included free board and lodging (Wangenge-Ouma, 2008; Teferra, 2013). With pressure for increasing enrollment, the rapidly rising unit (or per student) cost of higher education has not been able to keep pace with government revenue thereby challenging the sustainability of the tuition-free policy (Johnstone, 2003; Middlehurst and Teixeira, 2012). Moreover, the global transition towards neoliberal economic ideologies as the dominant development paradigm from the early 1980s onwards, called for the reduction in public spending on social services. The reality of this change was that governments could not adequately fund the

operations of higher education (Samoff and Carrol, 2004; Brown and Carasso, 2013). The resulting conundrum in Malawi and also reported in other African countries had been a 'crisis' in higher education raising serious concerns about quality and relevance of teaching, learning and research (Samoff & Carrol, 2004; Teferra, 2013; Valeta et al., 2016) .

Riding on the argument of 'more private than public benefits accruing from higher education', many countries have resorted to cost-sharing funding policies as a means of augmenting the available resources (Teferra, 2013). As beneficiaries of higher education including students, parents and guardians, and employers have to pay a significant proportion of the cost of higher education in the form of tuition fees, the need to be assured that they are getting 'value for money' arose (Middlehurst & Teixeira, 2012; Oketch, 2016). With reduction in public funding, HEIs were expected to maximize the desired outputs through more efficient use of resources. In many cases, this required organizational changes within institutions and strengthened the debate about QA (Bleiklie, Enders, Lepori, & Musselin, 2011).

3.1.3. Marketisation and privatization of higher education

The dominance of neoliberal economic ideologies has transformed HE systems around the world by policies of privatization and marketization (Molesworth, et al., 2011). This has included exogenous (external) privatization where 'private *for-profit* and *not-for-profit* providers' enter the HE sector traditionally dominated by public universities; and endogenous (internal) privatization; or application of 'market' or 'quasi-market' principles in the public HE sector, generally termed 'marketisation'(Ball & Youdell, 2007). Policy changes to liberalize the HE sector and unleash market dynamics, reflect a mixture of ideological and pragmatic imperatives (Brown and Carasso, 2013). There is a strong ideological drive to promote student (consumer) choice and competition among HEIs (providers) for both students and limited resources. The argument advanced is that market competition would make HEIs more efficient and responsive to the needs of students, the labour market/industry and the larger society. Quality of teaching and research may improve as institutions respond to their competitors and student demands (Dobbins, Knill, & Maria, 2011). Marketization also emerges as a stark solution to the dilemma of accommodating and sustaining increasing enrollments in higher education systems without the need to further expand public budgets (Kwiek, 2018). In developing countries of Sub-Sahara Africa where Malawi is found,

middle income countries of South America and East Asia and the developed countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the inability of the public sector to meet the growing social demand for HE necessitated entry of the private sector (Tamrat, 2018; Teixeira, Biscaia, Rocha, & Cardoso, 2016).

With the marketisation and privatization of higher education, the debate about quality arises on two accounts. The inception and rapid growth of for-profit private HE brings up issues of quality and standards of education bolstering demands for government action in terms of QA (Kwiek, 2018;Bennett, et al., 2012; Lim, 2010; Shah & Nair, 2013). Second, with strong competition for students and/or research funds among institutions, QA emerges as a means of providing potential 'consumers' of university services with information needed to make rational choices (Callender and Dougherty, 2018). This economic argument derived from the logic of perfect markets suggests, it is not the existence of QA procedures that are of interest but much more the use of information collected during these procedures on quality of HEIs, their academic programmes and research to protect the interest of stakeholders (Teixeira *et al.*, 2017).

3.1.4. Role of the State

The growing complexity and diversity of HE systems coupled with changing patterns of funding has led to transformation in the role of the state in the organization of higher education systems (Maniku, 2008). The coordination of the Malawi HE system has predominantly been a mixture of 'state-control' and 'academic self-regulation' (oligarchy). With the adoption of market approaches and the proliferation of non-state providers, countries have had to embrace a system where 'markets' and 'networks' also play a significant role (De Boer and Jongbloed, 2012). This trend is widely reported as the shift from 'state control' to 'state supervision'. The state provides an operational framework for the whole system and grants more autonomy to HEIs, accompanied by the simultaneous rise in the obligation to be accountable to society (Bleiklie et al., 2011; Varghese & Martin, 2013). The State's role becomes 'evaluative' rather than 'directive' (Middlehurst & Teixeira, 2012) necessitating the introduction of sophisticated techniques to monitor performance of HE systems (Shore, 2010). Bleiklie *et al.*, (2011) and De Boer, (2009) interpreted this as the neoliberal paradox of "steering from the distance" where the state creates buffer agencies (i.e. QA Agencies) to 'steer' HE more closely towards national priorities, whilst enabling HEIs to operate according to the combination of 'state' and 'market' regulation.

3.1.5. New public management reforms and accountability

'New managerialism' or 'new public Management' (NPM) generally consist of both the ideology about political change that constructs the need for the new regime in the regulation and management of universities as public service organizations (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014) and specific instruments and control techniques that emphasize the accountability of the public sector and the focus on results (Broucker & De Wit, 2013). Since the inception of NPM in the US and UK in 1980s, theories, techniques and practices of business management have increasingly been applied to the public sector internationally (Westerheijden, 2018). This does not mean that HE systems in every country evolved towards a full NPM model. NPM-related reforms have found a way into the HE systems of different countries at different times and with varied intensity and have to a larger extent been filtered by the national contexts (Broucker, et al., 2015; Paradeise et al., 2009).

The NPM reforms have produced two fundamental changes in the way universities have defined and justified their institutional existence (M Olssen & Peters, 2005). First, is the greater emphasis on 'corporatization' and the executive model of management, which transforms HEIs from the 'community of scholars' into an 'integrated organizational actor' (Gornitzka, et al., 2017) and 'academics' into 'staff' submitted to human resource management (Bleiklie *et al.*, 2011). More corporate models of HEIs governance have been adopted in the US and Europe (Broucker, et al., 2015). In Malawi, membership of University Councils, the bodies responsible for making strategic decisions in public universities is limited to the academic community, government, student union and alumni associations without representatives of the private sector and civil society (Mambo *et al.*, 2016). This has been linked to the university industry gap where employers often express concerns over the relevance of programmes offered and the quality of graduates (Mambo et al., 2016) as well as the weak university management and accountability systems (Government of Malawi, 2008, 2013). The 'corporatization' of universities challenges the collegial nature of academic work that underpinned the historical view of QA in higher education (Semyonov & Platonova, 2017). The NPM model emphasizes the operation of public universities in a similar way as the private sector. The underlying assumption being that private sector organizations are run more efficiently and effectively and therefore with high quality (Broucker et al., 2015).

Related to ‘corporatization’ has been an institutional stress on performativity, evidenced by the emergence and emphasis on measured outputs, performance-based funding and targets, quantifiable indicators and audits (M Olssen & Peters, 2005). Michael Power described this as the rise of the “audit society”(Power, 1996, 2000). This is the form of accountability that emerged in HE corresponding to the more general ‘audit culture’ observable in the public sector, although national responses tend to differ mainly in terms of mechanisms set up for HEIs. It has become a common practice in most countries that bureaucratic state agencies create criteria of performance in teaching and research and rules for reporting and accountability necessary for the assessment of universities and the application of formulas linking assessed quality to funding (Eurydice, 2008; Jongbloed, 2010; Teferra, 2013).

3.1.6. Role of international organizations (IOs)

International organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU) and more recently the World Trade Organization (WTO) have actively promoted and contributed to the QA movement in HE (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014; The World Bank, 2002b; UNESCO, 2009). As complex hubs of policy communities and technical bureaucracies that handle data and provide expertise in public policy, their role has been inevitable (Moutsios, 2010). However, IOs initiatives have been criticized for promulgating one-size fit all solutions and perpetuating neo-colonial domination by centering western knowledge (Cole, 2015; Shahjahan, 2016). Nevertheless, albeit with various functions IOs, have “sponsored policy learning platforms, coordinated members to ensure policy implementation, collected/analyzed data about HE trends, and developed national reports, analytical reports, thematic cross-national reviews, and guidelines informing HE policy” (Shahjahan, 2016 p. 294). In developing countries, the establishment of national QA agencies and regional QA networks have been actively promoted and financially supported the World Bank and UNESCO (Maniku, 2008; UNESCO, 2008).

Likewise, global and regional professional networks of QA organizations have emerged and contributed in significant ways to the internationalization of the policy-making environment regarding the proliferation of QA systems and policies in higher education. The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in higher education (INQAAHE), established in 1991

by a dozen of national QA Agencies increased to more than 300 member organizations from over 80 industrialized and developing countries by 2017 (INQAAHE, 2017). The INQAAHE plays several key roles; acting as a liaison between international organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO and OECD and its members; promoting knowledge and expertise for development of QA professionals; sharing an institutionalized international network for dissemination of 'good' practices; and facilitating cross-border recognition of credentials (INQAAHE, 2017). The most firmly grounded of the QA networks at regional level is the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) founded in 1999, while the ones directly linked to Malawi, are the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and the Southern Africa Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) established in 2007 and 2014 respectively. As global bodies take more active roles in spreading information and 'good' practices about QA in HE, it can be argued, that they have contributed to the development of the quality culture that has challenged many countries to develop or adjust the HE policies.

3.1.7. Internationalization and cross-border higher education

The internationalization of HE more specifically 'cross-border' or 'transnational' higher education is the most recent trend that has raised concerns about quality in both developed and developing countries (Ewell, 2010). Cross-border higher education has developed as a lucrative business for both for-profit sector and traditional non-profit universities with financial deficits. With the inclusion of 'education services' in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, student mobility 'study abroad' has been augmented by newer forms of cross-border education provision such as franchising, online programmes (e-learning), joint programmes and branch campuses established abroad (Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011).

While some 'exporting' and 'importing' countries had long developed national frameworks that consider the cross-border higher education, many countries in Sub-Sahara Africa did not have such systems (Jingura & Kamusoko, 2018). The rapid growth of cross-border providers has been accompanied by the internationalization and commercialization of accreditation services (Ewell, 2010). The veritable explosion of new agencies some 'non-recognized', 'accreditation mills' taking on roles for different aspects of QA, raised the need to evaluate and certify these agencies

(Altbach, et al, 2009). The increase in cross-border student, academic staff, researcher and professional mobility further produced the need to understand the equivalence of academic and professional qualifications obtained from one country to be transferred to another (Maniku, 2008). This required additional national initiatives with a global range aimed to establish equivalence of qualification and to validate local and overseas qualification. These challenges collectively contributed to pushing the QA debate on the international agenda, supporting efforts to establish appropriate national and regional QA frameworks and regulatory systems.

Thus, although not exhaustive, the trends discussed above suggest that the debate about 'quality' in higher education emerges from various factors, originating from several sources. The factors could be internal to higher education systems including numerical expansion if accompanied by a decline in funding and transformations in institutional governance as part of public management reforms. The internationalization of higher education would require harmonization of local and international instruments. The other factors could be external but within the nation state, relating to the general policy orientation of political authorities. The adoption of neoliberal policy paradigm would imply reduction in financial support, setting up markets for higher education and changing the role of the state with implications on the relationship between government, HEIs, and societal actors and their prerogative to shape policy processes. The other factors could relate to the role of supra-national organizations and professional networks which may act as places of QA policy incubation and production.

3.2. Conceptualizing quality and quality assurance in higher education

3.2.1. Defining quality

Although there is no agreement about the definition of quality in higher education (Elassy, 2015; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016), the 'quality' concept is not new. It has been a permanent concern of universities since their establishment in the medieval ages, having always been part of the academic ethos (Rosa & Amaral, 2007). Universities traditionally stressed the self- and collegial-accountability and self-improvement (Brennan & Shah, 2000). They trusted their staff and relied on the professionalism of academics to ensure their quality and standing in society. It was the intrinsic dimension of quality that dominated the academe such that when people spoke about quality, it was only in "lofty and abstract terms" (Elassy, 2015, p. 251), since the judgment of

academics was the only practical measure of quality (Turner, 2011). The external dimension and explicit attention to reviewing institutional 'quality' became a matter of public policy in the 1980s (Rosa & Amaral, 2007). As policy makers and the academic world begun to look to the manufacturing industry and business world for ideas on quality, they started to struggle with what is meant by quality in higher education (Woodhouse, 2012).

The concept of quality has been found to be dynamic, multifaceted and value-laden (Law, 2010a). Stakeholders including students, employers, professions bodies, university staff, regulatory and funding agencies, international organizations, and the general public, with different interests, values and expectations about higher education, place emphasis on different dimensions of quality (L. Harvey & Green, 1993). The interpretation of the concept of quality comes to depend much on the person (s) who set the objectives of the QA policy and systems and "it is not until it is put into practice or 'operationalized' that it becomes definable" (Kauko, et al., 2018, p. 1). Harvey & Green (1993) categorized stakeholders views about quality into five broad interpretations representing formal meaning still relevant to the current context of higher education (Prisacariu & Shah 2016). These are:

- *Quality as exceptional*: This implies something special, distinctive and linked to excellence or surpassing the set standards. The problem with this notion is that it promotes elitism and mostly reputation easily becomes a proxy for excellence.
- *Quality as perfection:* This connotes absence of error or consistently flawless outcome and largely applies to the world of industry where the production chain must meet the exact pre-specification of the desired product in its perfect form without any defect. But it may not fit easily into an educational context. It is impossible to define a 'flawless' or 'zero defect' graduate of an educational process since, epistemologically no knowledge is perfectly adequate, no matter how superior it may be (Mhlanga, 2008).
- *Quality as fitness 'for' and 'of' purpose*. This underscores that the product or service must conform to the institutional mission and objectives that are acceptable and aligned to broad national goals and customer specification.
- *Quality as value for money*. This relates quality to return on investment linked to the relationship between quality of education and its monetary value that demands economic efficiency.

- *Quality as transformation*. This implies the enhancement, empowerment and value-added to the learner in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Harvey & Knight (1996) argued that "transformation is a meta-quality concept and that other concepts are possible (although not very good) operationalization of the transformative process rather than ends in themselves" (p. 15-16). They suggested that with mass higher education, value-added transformation ought to be the major element of any concept of quality other than excellence, fitness for purpose and value for money. However, problems of measuring quality as transformation (value-added) lead to difficulties in its practical application (Lomas, 2007).

The literature shows that several notions of the concept manifest in QA policies and practices of any given HE system. What differs is the relative emphasis laid on some conceptions depending on the context and power of policy actors. Given a variety of views that exist, 'it is not possible to talk about quality as a unitary concept: quality needs to be defined in terms of a range of 'qualities' and this must consider other aspects of quality such as quality of inputs, process, outputs and outcomes', and how they satisfy both internal and external stakeholders by meeting their explicit and implicit values and expectations. Since the purposes of HE varies and changes across time and context in response to changing environments, there is a strong support for embracing quality in terms of 'fitness for purpose'. Similarly, with the growing strategic interest of countries in developing a 'knowledge economy', the characteristic of HE systems favoured by public policy obviously includes that of adding value to national development and global competitiveness. This is indicative of the view that HE must produce graduates who are not only transformed, but are transforming (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Therefore, apart from 'fitness for purpose', quality must take a 'transformational' approach. Whatever approach to defining quality, has major implications on the nature of the QA policies adopted in any given HE system.

3.2.2. Quality Assurance

There is no universally accepted definition of quality assurance in higher education (Martin & Stella, 2007). Many terms, predominantly 'quality assurance' and 'quality enhancement' are often used interchangeably despite the ontological tension (Elassy, 2015; Williams, 2016b). The current trend emphasizes the notion of 'quality enhancement' which presupposes reforming the

university's own collegial processes for assuring academic quality (Dill, 2020). In this study QA is considered an umbrella term for all activities related to quality of HE whose ultimate purpose is broadly understood to 'maintain' and 'enhance' quality (Woodhouse, 2012). As Campbell & Rozsnyai (2002, p. 34) put it, quality assurance is an "all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes and actions through which the quality of HE is maintained and developed". Similarly, Vlasceanu, et al., (2007) describe QA as:

> "An all-embracing term referring to ongoing, continuous process of evaluation (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of higher education system, institution or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism quality assurance focus on both accountability and improvement, providing an agreed and consistent process and well-established criteria" (p. 74).

Many other scholars define QA in various ways (Harman, 1998a; Michaela Martin & Stella, 2007; Materu, 2007). The definitions demonstrate that QA is a generic term that is open to multiple interpretations. However, some common ideas and issues can be picked, including the emphasis on process (Msiska, 2016). QA as a process implies that is it planned and carried out in a systematic and organized manner, and that it is continuous and entails the collection of policies, procedures, systems and practices designed to ensure that quality is achieved, maintained and enhanced (Williams, 2016b). Most of the definitions further imply functions of QA such as accountability and improvement, although not everyone agrees on this.

3.2.3. Politics of quality assurance: competing quality values

Skolnik (2010) eloquently argues that QA procedures in higher education are designed as if it was a technical process, but it may be more useful to view it as a political process. Harvey and Newton (2004) observed that QA is not a 'value-neutral measuring process' but rather it is "imbued with politics" (p.156). However, the technical-rational perspectives of quality tend to conceal the political nature of quality activities (Gerardo Blanco Ramírez, 2013). Many others have claimed that QA should be understood as an important tool to exercise power (Kauko et al., 2018; Morley, 2003; Saarinen, 2010; Westerheijden, Stensaker, et al., 2007b). Thus, QA can be viewed as both a political and technical process (Beerkens, 2015; Skolnik, 2010). While the evaluative aspects of quality assurance aims to produce technically valid assessments, such evaluations often are associated with competition for scarce resources, conflict over status, and power over decisions about whose values and interest should dominate (Harman, 2001). QA requires making choices

among competing conceptions of quality, and in doing so privilege some interests over others. Moreover some stakeholders tend to be given a greater voice than others in the design and implementation of QA (Skolnik, 2010).

Whilst some scholars (Beerkens, 2015; Filippakou, 2017; Kauko et al., 2018) have called attention to the political nature of QA, most studies concentrate on the technical aspect focusing on QA procedures and methodologies and examining their impact. There is an implicit assumption rooted in technical rationality that the challenges of QA and management can be solved by employing the right technique or by adjusting the strategy. Ramírez (2013) argued that the study of quality in higher education need to be revitalized by new perspectives that go beyond technical-rational assumptions. Skolnik (2010) concluded that "rather than denying the political nature of QA, it was better to accept that QA is a socially constructed domain of power and design procedures in a way that is appropriate for a political process" (p. 1). The key argument from these studies was that understanding the politics of QA and the nature of the policy making processes could provide important insights to the nature of its implementation and consequently its overall impact.

Luckett (2006, 2007) demonstrated that QA in higher education is underpinned by different and conflicting values and policy analysis must not focus solely on how quality is defined officially, but on whose values and interest QA serves. Salter and Tapper (2000) observed that QA combines technical, bureaucratic and competing value elements in ways which give power to some and remove it from others. Brennan & Shah (2000) empirically identified four sets of values relating to quality namely: 'academic, managerial, pedagogic and employment focused'. Luckett (2006, 2007) drew on the four types of 'quality values' and developed new categories termed 'rationalities' underlying the purposes and power tensions linked to QA approaches namely: collegial, managerial, facilitative and bureaucratic rationalities. These categories focus on the politics of quality by addressing four key questions: who decides what criteria or measure of quality should be? Who controls the QA system? Who initiates and owns it? Is the ownership internal or external to the academy? (Luckett, 2006, 2007).

The collegial rationality is based on traditional norms and values of academics. They initiate, design and control the QA system, whose purpose is improvement of teaching and learning. The

managerial type considers that quality can be produced by 'good management' where university senior management, initiates, designs and control the QA systems aimed to enhance accountability in terms of institutional policies and procedures. The facilitative rationality is where control and ownership are external, but the QA system is improvement oriented. The external agency plays a supportive role that serves to make QA more systematic, explicit and institutionalized. The bureaucratic approach is based on norms and values linked to quality control, accountability and compliance purposes. The QA system is initiated, designed and controlled externally by government external authority/agency. Luckett (2007) and Kahsay (2012) claimed that to be effective, the QA system requires a balanced blending of the four rationalities. Most recent studies suggest the design of the national QA system that is more collegial and facilitative could be the most effective to enhance academic quality (Dill, 2020). However, the extent to which the QA system can be said to be increasingly collegial and facilitative or managerial and bureaucratic depends on the set of actors that are given the leading voice in the development of the QA system and this can be identified by a policy study (Ramírez, 2013).

3.2.4. Internal and external quality assurance: Debate about accountability and improvement

External QA is where policies and practices are developed or heavily influenced by an external agency or supra-institutional body that assesses operations of HE institutions (Martin & Stella, 2007) while internal QA is underpinned by policies and practices that are developed and implemented by academic institutions themselves to improve quality of education (Dill, 2010). External QA is primarily about accountability, compliance, and regulatory control (Westerheijden, et al., 2007) and assumes quality models as consistency, fitness for purpose, and value for money which are quite distant from improvement of student learning (Becket & Brookes, 2008). The internally-driven QA is formative in nature (Harvey & Williams, 2010) and considered more superior at enhancing improvement in terms of student learning, prioritizing the transformative approach to quality (World Bank, 2010).

There is tension between accountability and improvement functions linked to external and internal QA (Beerkens, 2015). How appropriate balance between the two might be attained is another outstanding issue (Westerheijden, et al., 2014). The accountability focused system of QA works

on assumption that external monitoring of quality ultimately results in system improvement. However many scholars argue that accountability and improvement are separate dimensions of QA based on philosophically opposite quality paradigms hence improvement cannot easily be achieved through external monitoring (Aamodt, Frølich, & Stensaker, 2018; Dill, 2020). The improvement essence is thwarted as institutions become obsessed with demonstrating compliance and conformity to external requirements only to minimize disruption to their existing academic practice (World Bank, 2010). Despite the tension, the general view is that both internal and external QA are necessary and should be understood to compliment rather than to counter each other (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Rosa, et al., 2012). There are claims that balancing accountability and improvement requires external bodies reducing their control and giving institutions some autonomy in managing quality assurance rather than working on instructions from external agencies (Msiska, 2016). The QA system for HE can only be instrumental in promoting continuous improvement if they are internally owned and controlled where external QA agencies only play a supportive role to internal QA practices in line with the facilitative rationality (Kahsay, 2012).

3.3. Quality assurance approaches and policy instruments

The debates on QA often escalates to the choice of what is perceived as an 'appropriate' QA approach or instrument (Beerkens, 2015). While policy instruments employed may vary considerably, to address the interest of different stakeholders, countries adopt multiple instruments shaped by different rationalities. It was imperative to critically review the current major QA approaches to provide insights into the nature and mix of QA instruments embraced by the QA system in Malawi. This section reviewed selected instruments regulated by: the university (self-evaluation and external examiner system), the state (accreditation, assessment, audits and qualifications framework), and the market/society (performance indicators, ranking, student survey and the risk-based approach) (Dill & Beerkens 2010).

3.3.1. Self-evaluation (self-study)

Self-evaluation (self-study) represent the institution's evaluation of own performance in relation to standards and its mission. The concept of self-study was developed in the United States in relation to institutional and course accreditation (Harman, 1998). The methodology however, has become an important part of many national quality assurance systems. Self-study is rooted in the

notion of the existence of a self-critical academic community within and among HEIs. Early adopters of self-study envisioned that academics "as highly educated and autonomous experts that produce specialized knowledge", needed some sort of self-steering on the basis that it was time consuming if not impossible to debate what was right or wrong with someone not a specialist in a particular discipline (Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010 p. 259). This would imply that HEIs themselves were better placed to monitor their input, processes and their output. It is this very notion of 'self-criticism' that politicians become sceptical and apprehensive about and desire 'hard' statistical data. Maniku (2008) stated that self-regulation through self-study or self-evaluation is imbued with 'academic capture' and a sense of 'playing the game'. Gamesmanship rather than results may be emphasized, with the consequence that whatever poor outcomes that exist might be hidden (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). The lack of openness to external stakeholders makes self-evaluative processes become a defensive mechanism rather than an opportunity to explore future developments. This undermines whatever strength that might be associated with the self-evaluation process. Nevertheless, self-regulatory approaches appropriately suit the academy as they are seen far less threatening than external evaluations mechanisms by state-led quality assurance agencies. It has been found to be more valuable to use in combination with other methodologies, for example peer review or audits to ensure that the process is taken seriously (McInnis, 2010).

3.3.2. External examiner system

External examiner is a "peer review system" that involves academic experts and professionals in the same field, from another institution, moderating examinations and other assessment tasks, reviewing a sample of student work and directly examining student's theses/dissertations. The system developed in the UK in 1830s (Medland, 2015) is prevalent globally, although examiner's roles differ across systems (Bloxham & Price, 2015). The external examiner system is designed to bring external accountability to ensure academic standards are maintained, are comparable with similar awards elsewhere, and that institution's academic regulation and assessment procedures are effective and fairly applied (Bloxham, 2009). It invariably takes on the dual roles of moderator/inspector and 'critical friend' (Higher Education Academy, UK, 2012).

There is a strong view that external examiner system is the best practice for monitoring education quality and maintaining standards (Allais, 2009; Finch Review, 2011; HEFC, 2015; Medland, 2015). The system is most valued by universities because it is one of the only QA instruments that directly address quality of student outputs by assessing the quality of student work (Bloxham et al., 2015). However, it has been subject to sustained critique including: the lack of consistency in examiners role (Bloxham & Price, 2015), ineffectiveness (Bermingham, et al., 2013), lack of comparability of academic standards (Finch Review UK, 2011), lack of criticality/seriousness - 'too cosy', as appointments are often based on personal relationships (Higher Education Academy, UK, 2012), and examiner's lack of assessment expertise or literacy (Medland, 2015). Yet none of the reviewed studies disputed the fundamental notion that external examiner system could make a major contribution to maintaining standards. The emerging discourses exclusively recommended improving the system by among others professionalizing the external examining system through establishment of the national register of external examiners (HEFC, 2015) to promote dialogue in which quality of underlying practices could be critiqued, shared and developed (Medland, 2015).

3.3.3. Accreditation, Assessment and Audits

Accreditation, assessment and audits are the three overarching approaches adopted in QA (Michaela Martin & Stella, 2007; Skolnik, 2010). Stensaker (2011) observed that accreditation has become the most dominant and is more comprehensive in nature in that "it encompasses the evaluation of mission, resources and relevant processes of institutions or programmes" (Law, 2010a, p. 70). Although different in their purposes and focus, the processes in the three approaches adopt common methods and follow a similar sequence (Dill, 2007): an institutional self-evaluation that produces a self-evaluation report. A panel of external peers reviews the self-evaluation report and verifies through documentation, interviews and site visit, then prepares and submits a reviewer's report containing commendation and recommendations. The reviewers' report forms the basis for subsequent decisions by relevant authorities. The features of each approach are briefly described below.

3.3.3.1. Accreditation

Originating from the United States in the early 1900s (Stensaker, 2011), accreditation is a process by which an authorized external agency/body evaluates a higher education institution or

programme to determine whether they meet certain standards to qualify for award of a status (Martin & Stella, 2007). It denotes the "licensing or registration" that stresses the "get keeping" role of an external QA agency based on external measures or standards against which an institution or programme are judged (Woodhouse, 2013 p. 3). The endowment of accreditation is often binary; either an institution or programmes is accredited or not, but in some cases the absolute binary might be blurred by a 'holding' decision that in effect permit progression to accreditation (Vlasceanu et al., 2007). The outcome of accreditation may have implications for the institution itself, its students and its graduates. If an institution has been accredited it is given permission to operate with a time-limited validity, while some private institutions become eligible for public funding; its students become eligible for educational grants and loans; and the qualifications awarded to graduates are recognized by employers (Woodhouse, 2013).

The most notable benefit of accreditation is that it assures the educational community, students and the general public that an institution or programme has clearly and appropriately defined mission and educational objectives, maintains conditions that could reasonably be expected to achieve such objectives (Martin & Stella, 2007), and is legally mandated to provide education and qualifications that would be accepted by employers (Msiska, 2016). This operates as a safety net, "to protect the public from being tricked into paying for courses which in the end will not enable them to be employed" (Allais, 2009 p. 20). However, accreditation has been profoundly criticized for placing more emphasis on minimum standards while downplaying the challenges of improving quality of student learning. Quality improvement is simply something that is assumed to happen if institutions comply with standards of the accrediting agency (Collins, 2015). Thus, accreditation is able to assure threshold level of quality, but is much less suited to stimulate continuous improvement above the threshold level (Dill, 2020).

3.3.3.2. Assessment

In quality assessment, an external agency or body directs the process and is responsible for the evaluation of the quality of an institution or programme (Skolnik, 2010). Quality assessment involves a systematic collection and analysis of data in order to "judge the instructional effectiveness and curricular adequacy of a higher education institution (institutional assessment) or of its programmes (programme assessment)"(Vlasceanu et al., 2007, p. 29-30). While

accreditation makes a binary decision (*yes/no*) relative to minimum standards, the outcome of assessment is a graded judgment of an institution or programme in form of a percentage, numerical number, or a description such as excellent, good, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory reflecting its quality (Woodhouse, 2013). However, quality assessment is often criticized for its bureaucratic nature, overpowering administrative burden and incentives to gamesmanship.

3.3.3.3. Institutional audits

Quality audits or academic audits are generally carried out at institutional level. The external agency evaluates the 'education quality processes', which aim at providing guarantees that institutions or academic units have suitable quality control mechanisms in place (Massy, 2010). Audit was first developed in the late 1980s in the UK and subsequently adopted by the Netherlands, Sweden and Hong Kong. It is an accountability mechanism that emphasises on the procedures and criteria that institutions use to manage their quality, rather than making judgments about quality of education they offer (Skolnik, 2010). Audit checks the extent to which an institution is achieving its stated objectives using procedures and criteria it put in place (Woodhouse, 2013). In other words, quality audits aim to build capacity of higher education institutions to ensure the quality of their programmes and student learning (Hsu, 2017). Ewell (2017) however, observed that countries that have implemented quality audits for a long time tend to encounter diminishing returns. For example, there were reforms in the UK partly linked to concerns that HEIs were getting less and less from quality audit processes at a steadily increasing cost (HEFC, 2015; HEFCE, 2012, 2016).

3.3.4. National qualification frameworks (NQFs*)*

Since the 1990s when national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) were first developed in Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and South Africa (Allais, 2010, 2011, 2017) many countries are involved in regional, transnational and national qualification frameworks (Blackmur, 2015). A "qualifications framework is an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels" (Tuck, 2007 p. v). It is a way of structuring qualifications, defined by learning outcomes, which indicate the comparability of different qualifications and the progression from one level to another within and across occupations and across vocational and academic fields (Koleva, et al., 2012). While NQFs are

linked to several purposes (McInnis, 2010), one strong argument has been improving and securing academic standards (Aamodt, Frølich, & Stensaker, 2018). NQFs are used as the meta-policy architecture for regulating higher education (Jarvis, 2014) and approaches to QA in several jurisdiction increasingly coalesce around qualification frameworks (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). The establishment of learning outcomes as the central component in NQFs implicitly or explicitly require that HEIs design and organize their study programmes in line with the learning outcomes paradigm (Aamodt, Frølich, & Stensaker, 2018).

Dill (2010 p. 5) contended that “the most significant contribution that qualifications frameworks make to national QA systems is to encourage a focus on student learning outcomes rather than course content in debates about academic standards”. NQFs are considered to have a more relevant pedagogical undertaking compared to approaches such as assessment, accreditation and audits (Aamodt et al., 2018; Dobbins et al., 2016). They are in principle seen to speak to the academic ethos by their direct link to the knowledge, skills and competencies of the disciplines. As Dobbins et al., (2016) and Cedefop (2015) reported, NQFs are constantly used by HEIs in Europe to identify gaps in existing qualifications and as reference for curricula/module design and assessment practices. By providing the systematic formulated frame of national standards, NQFs operate as the reference point for accreditation and institutional audits (McInnis, 2010). However, the overall impact of NQFs as instruments that promote and enhance academic standards has been found to be very limited and usually indirect (Dill, 2010; McInnis, 2010; Raffe, 2013; Allais, 2010, 2011).

3.3.5. Performance indicators (PIs)

Performance indicators (PIs) are generally data indices of information by which the operational and functional quality of institutions or systems may be measured and evaluated (Rowe & Lievesley, 2002). They measure either qualitatively or quantitatively an object, unit or process to determine the extent to which the specified goals and objectives are being met and permit comparisons, over time and with commonly accepted standards (Chalmers, 2008a). Kehm & Stensaker (2009) noted that with the marketisation of HE, PIs have become dominant in understanding ‘performance’ of the HE sector and institutions. Shah & Jarzabkowski (2013) observed a shift in most developed countries from concerns about *inputs* and *processes* to *outputs* and *outcomes*. According to Leiber (2019) HEIs use PIs for two primary purposes. First, to

facilitate monitoring, assessing and evaluating their performance for purposes of internal or external QA (for example in audits, assessments and accreditation). Second, to provide information to funders (e.g., government/taxpayers) and potential beneficiaries (students and general public). At national level, PIs are designed to ensure accountability, facilitate comparison of HEIs, verify quality of HE provision, and stimulate competition within and between institutions (Chalmers, 2008b).

The development and use of PIs however, raises political issues related to the public judgment of relative performance (Neumann & Guthrie, 2006), the technical issues related to validity and reliability of PIs, and the level of technical sophistication to report highly complex higher educational processes (Pollard et al., 2013). There is normally the overdependence on quantitative input and output PIs which can be easily measured, over qualitative PIs which could measure complex education processes and outcomes yet both qualitative and quantitative PIs covering the four types of inputs, process, outputs and outcomes are essential for any successful QA indicator system (Gibbs, 2010).

3.3.6. Ranking/League tables

The common application of PIs has been to constitute a composite score to compare one institution from another through rankings in 'league tables'. University ranking has grown considerably at both national and global level since the US News and World Report started publishing 'America's best colleges ranking' in 1983 (Harvey, 2008). The *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and *World university rankings* from the Times Higher Education Supplement in the UK are considered to be among the most prominent global rankings (Bergseth, Petocz, & Dahlgren, 2014). Universities are ranked drawing on statistical data produced by various governmental and grant-making agencies, universities themselves and surveys (Usher & Medow, 2009). The rankings are mostly produced by commercial organizations and popular media though recently, government agencies, professional societies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and HEIs have ventured into the 'enterprise'. These differ in their format, content and methodology and "only a few are based on results from specific quality assessments, evaluations or accreditation activities undertaken by the public sector" (Bergseth et al., 2014 p. 331). In spite of the differences, the continued publication of rankings is claimed to be indicative

of the growing national and global demand for consumer information on academic quality, following the globalised higher education market (Kehm & Stensaker, 2009).

There is however little evidence that the selection and weighting of indicators is underpinned by a thorough theoretical reflection (Bergseth, et al., 2014; Kehm & Stensaker, 2009). Several scholars have found the validity and reliability of the selection and weighting of indicators and the act of comparing diverse and complex institutions wanting (Harvey, 2008; Kehm & Stensaker, 2009; Usher & Medow 2009; Gibbs, 2010). Nevertheless, there is growing acceptance and realization that rankings can and do serve an important role (R. Brown, 2006; Tapper & Filippakou, 2009). The open comparison in rankings is believed to act as a spur to institutions that fall below standards achieved within the sector (Hazelkorn, 2008). Ranking is perceived to help maintain and build institutional position and reputation (Tapper & Filippakou, 2009). Students and parents increasingly use rankings in their decisions about choice of university, while for government, funding agencies and employers, ranking provide some measure of judgment on decisions about funding, sponsorship and graduate employee recruitment (A. R. Bell & Brooks, 2018).

3.3.7. Student surveys

Student surveys predicated on the significance of seeking feedback from students as ‘consumers’ to determine their satisfaction, is another most frequently used QA instrument (Arthur, 2019). Student surveys are undertaken at different stages of student experience whilst studying in the institution and after graduation and take three predominant levels of analysis: the module/course, study programme, and institutional survey of entire study experiences (Harvey, 2011). They employ ‘feedback questionnaires’ to collect relevant data from students at the end of every semester to rate the modules/courses (Reid, 2010); in final year of study to rate their total educational experience and services provided by institutions(Arthur, 2019); and thereafter provide employment history. The surveys of overall study experience and employment history form an essential component of the national QA systems (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015). There is a current emphasis on system wide national surveys of student’s total educational experience designed to compare institutions and allow benchmarking of standards (R. Bennett & Kane, 2014; Webber, Lynch, & Oluku, 2013).

As Spooren, et al., (2013) argued, student survey must be seen as the most important dimension of quality monitoring and assessment since they are the only stakeholder of the education systems who can provide the immediate receivers' viewpoint. They can identify student needs and potential areas for immediate attention or remediation (R. Bennett & Kane, 2014; Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015) and provide valuable information to: university management for personnel decisions, and potential direction and changes; prospective employers regarding the employability of graduates; and government for the development of HE policy (Langan, et al., 2017; Marsh, et al., 2011; Bell & Brooks, 2018). However, there is little research evidence that student feedback actually improves quality of teaching and learning (Arthur, 2019). This could be due to the disjuncture between the assiduous collection of student feedback in many institutions and the potential use in practice (Beran & Rokosh, 2009; Harvey, 2011), serious doubts among academics about the student's capacity to make informed judgments about quality of teaching (Spooren et al., 2013; Law, 2010), and potential biases of survey questionnaires which often do not comprehensively capture the multidimensionality of education quality (M. Yorke, 2009). National student surveys, often conceived in a generic and highly abstract way to allow for comparison of institutions rather than to discern contextual dimensions have also been found to add little value to formative use (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015).

3.3.8. The risk-based approach

The risk-based regulation is an emerging approach to QA underpinned by the principles of regulatory necessity, reflecting risks and proportionate regulation (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). The approach is based on the assumption that quality risks are not equally distributed and therefore it is more efficient for government to focus on high risk cases (Beerkens, 2015; Edwards, 2012). This would imply that monitoring of HEIs should be selective, taking into consideration the proportionality and the cost-benefit ratio of external assessment. A valid risk-based approach however need to be informed by good evidence (Raban, 2017). It may also be difficult to predict risks precisely especially with the increasing uncertainty that characterize the HE sector (King, 2014). Insights can be drawn from the UK and Australia which are among the countries supplanting academic audits with more standard and risk-based systems.

The Australian framework under the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) scans the HE sector, placing providers into categories (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). According to TEQSA (2015), better established HEIs with long "history of providing HE, successful track record of quality, financial standing, and performance" (p. 2) receive 'light touch' regulation reducing the need to engage in audits to demonstrate QA processes, while new entrants and HEIs considered high-risk undergo extensive reviews and assessment, subject to consequences including de-registration and closure. TEQSA identifies risks to quality against threshold standards and indicators, with three overarching priorities: risk to students, risk of provider collapse and risk to sector reputation (Jarvis, 2014). As the TEQSA framework emphasizes outcomes and documentation of evidence and rarely involves site visit or self-assessment, Shah & Jarzabkowski (2013) argue that it is heavily compliance based and represent a fundamental departure from the previous improvement led frameworks.

The HEFCE (2012, 2016) articulated the proposed UK risk-based system, which is based on the principle of co-regulation with robust and light-touch strategies, but unlike the Australian system, it balances a differentiated approach with additional 'meta' monitoring of internal QA processes. The UK system emphasises the formulation of internal QA processes which resembles systems in countries like Germany, Hong Kong and Taiwan that permit self-accreditation of programmes for lower-risk institutions with robust internal QA systems (Brown, Kurzweil, & Pritchett, 2017; Yung et al., 2018). Although the risk-based approach is too new to assess, it points to attempts to create QA systems that incentivizes institutional improvements, organizational learning and self-regulation (Ewell, 2017).

The review above shows that each of the approaches/instruments has both strength and weaknesses. The various instruments can be linked to different quality values and rationalities. While self-evaluation and external examination are influenced by academic rationalities, accreditation, assessment, performance indicators, ranking and national student surveys tend to be rooted in employment values and bureaucratic rationalities. Institutional audits and qualifications framework linked to capacity building of internal quality processes may be informed by facilitative rationality. The choice of an appropriate approach or an instrument mix, may differ among

countries depending on various factors including the history and tradition of the higher education system and the dominant quality values espoused by policy actors.

3.4. Stakeholders and their involvement in QA processes

The recognition of the key role of various stakeholder groups and how their values and interests may be utilized in the formation of QA systems and policies for higher education has become a highly visible issue (Leisyte and Westerheijden, 2014; Logermann and Leisyte, 2015). By classic definition a stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of organizational objectives"(Mitchell *et al.*, 1997, p. 856). In higher education, stakeholders might imply all those policy actors who have a 'stake' – that is who may influence the universities behaviour, direction, processes and outcomes (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014) including the government, university staff, students, regulatory and funding agencies, professional bodies, employers; international organization and the general public. The diverse expectations and experiences of various stakeholder groups are expected to contribute to the development of a more effective and comprehensive QA system (Beerkens & Udam, 2017).

Scholars that have examined policy actors and problematize the nature of their engagement suggest that students and academics tend to have a very circumscribed role and power in QA policymaking (Cardoso, et al., 2016; 2018). Filippakou & Tapper (2008) in the UK demonstrated that from 1980 to 2001, the quality agenda and policy processes had been dominated by government, its relevant departments and agencies/funding councils. While higher education institutions umbrella organizations played an influential role and that other interest groups were co-opted, they were largely reactive to policy directions already set by government. More recently, with the relocation of HE policymaking to the supra-national level in Europe, apart from the central role of stakeholder coalitions of the QA agencies and representative association of student and universities (the E4 group – ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE) (Eggins, 2014), there has been a further limited ground for substantial political debate amongst academics (Moutsios, 2010).

There are claims that the QA policy formation has become a matter of government political authorities, QA agencies, HEIs Managers, and quality professionals (Saarinen, 2010; Cardoso, Rosa and Stensaker, 2016). Skolnik (2010) observed in Canada that academics have limited

opportunity for input into the way QA policy processes are designed, its purposes or the criteria for the selection of policy instruments. Mhlanga (2008) found that while QA agencies and university managers in South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe followed a highly consultative process of policymaking, the extensive consultation was mainly with international experts at the expense of local academic staff. This suggest that in terms of shaping national QA systems the academic community and practitioners have been "taking" rather than "making" the quality agenda. Perhaps the dominance of national QA systems that focus on state regulation and accountability could be partly explained by failure of academics to champion QA policy processes.

3.5. Quality assurance system's major implementation issues

Most recent studies have focused on the impact of QA policies on HE systems among the early adopters (Dattey, et al., 2017; Leiber et al., 2018; Stensaker & Leiber, 2016). These studies provide important insights related to debates about implementation which can be observed at five different and broad levels: (1) the role of QA agencies (2) influence of QA on higher education organization and management (3) influence of QA on teaching, learning and curriculum processes, (4) the implementation 'gap' and constraints and (5) the academics perception and response to quality assurance procedures.

3.5.1. The role of quality assurance agencies

QA agencies have been established in countries worldwide responsible for regulating higher education and managing QA processes (El-Khawas, 2013). While there are commonalities among national QA agencies across countries, Woodhouse (2004, 2012) and Msiska (2016) observed that QA agencies differ in terms of legal status, structure, functions, source of funding and scope. Some are set up and maintained by government, others are established by government but are operationally autonomous, while others are set up by private organizations and/or institutional consortia and operate privately like in the United States. National QA agencies are generally responsible for conducting evaluations, developing criteria of quality, capacity building of peer assessors, publication of evaluation reports, and in other countries playing an advisory role to government (Materu, 2007).

However, there are few studies related to QA agencies in developing countries (Harvey and Williams, 2010). El-khawas (2013) observed that the introduction of national QA agencies has been more controversial in some countries. QA agencies may alter the existing distribution of authority and power. They could justify some reduction in state control and make it acceptable to transfer power from state to HEIs but also challenge established traditions of institutional autonomy. In addition, QA agencies still face unresolved issues, some strategic and others more technical (El-Khawas, 2013). The role and status of QA agencies can be readily challenged. The major concern is whether QA agencies can gain sufficient degree of independence to insulate them somewhat from government political intervention and control, and the extent such independence could lead to greater trust among stakeholders (Hsu, 2017).

3.5.2. Influence of QA on organization and management

The large body of empirical literature on implementation of QA policies suggest that QA is related to organizational and managerial changes within HEIs (Shah, et al., 2011; Stensaker *et al.*, 2011; Sahlin, 2012). Scholars note that the responses of institutions to external changes provoked by QA policies often become structured in terms of new management and organizational structures including strengthened management positions and expanded communication departments (Sahlin and Eriksson-zetterquist, 2016; Hsu, 2017). A trend towards more centralization and bureaucratization in terms of procedures and organizational decision-making has been observed in many developed countries (Tapanila, et al., 2018; Stensaker *et al.*, 2011) accompanied by power shift from individual academics to the system or institution (Bleiklie et al., 2011; Gornitzka et al., 2017). Academic managers and non-academic administrators assume more power to organize, control and regulate the work of academic staff and the conditions of their work (Altbach, et al., 2009). This has been interpreted by others as a form of cultural change in higher education brought by QA systems in the direction of increased managerialism inspired by the neoliberal new public management (Shepherd, 2018; Tapanila, et al., 2018).

Haapakorpi (2011) study in Finland concluded that organizational structures, management and the disciplinary cultures are important when exploring the implementation and influence of QA policies in universities. That within universities, the outcomes of QA could vary based on the interaction of organizational structures, management styles and academic cultures. The "units with

strong disciplinary culture and position can maintain their relative independence from institutional pressure of the university management" (p. 79). Similarly, both intended responses and unintended outcomes could manifest because QA mechanism and strategies are not often executed as intended or consequences of decisions could be slightly different than expected. Thus, although some studies are based in western contexts, they can provide important insights on issues related to the implementation of the QA system in Malawi.

3.5.3. Influence of QA on teaching, learning and curriculum

The other studies on implementation of QA have explored the influence of QA mechanisms on teaching, learning and curricula from the perspectives of various stakeholders (Liu and Liu, 2018; Vincenzi, et al., 2018). While it is assumed that QA policies are set up to improve teaching and learning, to what extent QA policies influence teaching continues to be debated. Studies show that students, academic staff, institutional managers in universities and QA agencies perceive the influence of QA systems differently (Harvey, 2006; Stensaker *et al.*, 2011). QA agency staff and managers within universities tend to see more positive effects of QA mechanisms than academic staff and students. The positive arguments from some studies in developed countries are that the external QA mechanisms provide an impetus for considerable attention to be given towards monitoring quality of teaching and learning; increased academic's awareness of good teaching and improved undergraduate classroom teaching practice (Dill, 2000; Kis, 2005; Cheng, 2010). The external QA mechanisms were found to be an enabler for planned changes at universities including establishment of internal QA systems for monitoring teaching and learning in Europe (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010), Australia (Shah, 2013) and Canada (Liu & Liu, 2018).

More positive influences including the empowerment of university managers to monitor teaching, high quality curricula, adoption of learning-oriented outcome based education, improved teaching and learning conditions, high standards of students' assessment, and improved follow up mechanisms have been reported in developing countries particularly, Argentina (Vincenzi, et al., 2018) and Ghana (Dattey et al., 2017; Utuka, 2011). However, the studies do not claim the impact these transformations have on student learning outcomes. On the contrary, other studies question the influence of QA on teaching and learning and reinforce the view that QA systems contribute little to the improvement of teaching and curriculum (Rosa & Amaral, 2012). Instead, QA systems

are perceived to be closely associated with improvement of discipline and technology for validation, monitoring, and external scrutiny (Shah and Nair, 2013; Shah 2012).

Cheng's (2010) study in the UK found that the influence of QA on the curriculum was perceived to be significant through accreditation of professional bodies over some vocational programmes rather than through mechanisms employed by national QA agencies. In contrast, adjustments of programme curriculum to meet standards of accreditation by the quality agency in Argentina (Vincenzi, et al., 2018) and Ghana (Dattey et al., 2017; Utuka, 2011) were perceived to enhance quality of curricula. Lea and Callaghan (2008) found that increased external control over curriculum was considered a major constraint on academics. The authors argued that the need for standards and accountability was recognized by academics, but the over-prescription of the curriculum design through external control was perceived to diminish their perceived control over teaching and academic autonomy. These studies suggest that the influence of QA systems on teaching, learning, and curricula is somewhat mixed and could vary between countries although in both developed and developing countries studies do not ascertain the impact of QA mechanisms on student learning outcomes.

3.5.4. QA systems ‘implementation gap’, and constraints

Scholars have stressed the importance of the “implementation gap” (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2018; Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014): defined as the difference between planned outcomes or planned intentions of the QA system and policies and the actual outcome of the implementation process (Agasisti et al., 2019). The general debate is that the QA system architecture dismally contribute to enhancing the ‘quality culture’ due to its overly emphasis on evaluation and measurement of the character of university’s organizational structure and activities, while neglecting the values and practices shared by the academic community (Chmielecka, 2014; Dill, 2020). European Universities Association stated that ‘quality culture’ should complement the structural dimension of QA with the dimension of the organization’s ethos – that is underlying values, skills and practices of its members (European Universities Association (EUA), 2006; Vettori & Loukkola, 2013).

Empirical studies from various countries in Europe ascribe the 'implementation gap' to mainly the problem of 'ownership' (Agasisti et al., 2019; Cardoso et al., 2016, 2018, 2019; Vettori & Loukkola, 2013). It is claimed that external QA procedures are imposed on academics backed by sanctions which do not promote ownership. Instead, the top down imposition of QA tools result in contradictory reforms which are often replete with tension (Agasisti et al., 2019). The challenges of translating supra-national QA models to the national context within universities has been found to be another issue (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019; Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2018). This suggest the success of the QA system may depend less on the rigor of applications but more on its contingent use and how it is received and decoded within universities.

Studies from some developing countries of Asia (Dao, 2015; Hou, et al., 2018; Pham, 2018) and Africa (Boateng, 2014; Mhlanga, 2008; Utuka, 2011), suggest that many of the conditions required for successful implementation of national QA systems may not be present in some countries and universities. These studies highlight challenges in terms of QA agencies capacity; financial constraints; ineffective self-assessments; inappropriate selection and composition of reviewers; reviewers' capacity, conduct and professionalism; and the dominant cultures not open to change as some constraints to effective implementation of QA systems. Whilst we cannot generalize finding of these studies to all countries, they show that several challenges and constraints could affect the implementation of QA systems and these were investigated in the context of Malawi.

3.5.5. Academics behaviors and responses to quality assurance policies

Academics as 'foot soldiers' have a central role in any QA system (Cardoso et al., 2018). However, studies that have explored academics behaviour and universities responses to changes driven by QA particularly in developed countries show that academics tend to have negative views about QA processes (Cheng, 2009; Skolnik, 2010). Among others they present general complaints about increased workload resulting from accreditation demands (Gerardo B. Ramírez & Luu, 2018) and bureaucratization (Carson, 2019). The QA processes are perceived to create tension between academic autonomy and external monitoring (Cheng, 2009; Seema, Udam, & Mattisen, 2016). While some academics acknowledge the utility of the QA systems in raising awareness about the weaknesses in the higher education systems (Seema et al., 2016), they tend to have reservations with the form of QA and how QA is implemented (Gallagher, 2014). The academics attitude have

also been found to change over time if QA systems are implemented in a stakeholder specific way (Overberg & Ala-Vähälä, 2020).

There are claims that academics respond to the QA regime by developing 'ritualistic' behaviors simply to fulfill requirements (Harvey & Williams, 2010b) while others resist QA procedures (Kemenade & Hardjono, 2009; Skolnik, 2010) although this might vary depending on academics profiles and history of HEIs (Lucas, 2014). Focusing on organization change associated with QA schemes Teelken (2012) suggested that intended changes may actually result in contradictory effects with three different coping strategies derived from institutional and professional theory and empirical research. These are: 'symbolic compliance', 'professional pragmatism' or 'formal instrumentality'. While symbolic compliance implies an attitude of pretense of enthusiasm and critical resistance; and professional pragmatism, a more realistic, down-to-earth approach to dealing with QA measure in a critical but serious manner; formal instrumentality shows the most positive of view concerning external QA arrangements and procedures and lacks a critical perspective (Teelken, 2012, 2015). It is possible that the reported behavioral responses in other countries are different from what individuals in HEIs in Malawi may perceive. However, the findings present a challenge for both institutions and QA agencies, since academic's ownership of QA is essential for the quality improvement aspect of any QA systems.

3.6. Conclusion

The debate about QA in higher education generally emerges from various factors, originating from different sources. The factors could be internal to higher education systems or external but within the nation state. The other factors could relate to the role of supra-national organizations/agencies and professional networks. While QA is both a technical and political process, most scholarly work has not examined the political dimension of QA, an area that formed the focus of this study influenced by scholars that suggested understanding the political nature of QA policy processes could provide important insights to the complexities surrounding QA systems in higher education. QA in most contexts is associated with accountability rather than quality enhancement and the power relations between stakeholders with competing values and interest tend to shape QA approaches adopted by a country. The development of QA is dynamic and complex and its implementation tend to be replete with several constraints, some structural, others linked to

behaviors of staff in universities who may respond by resisting policies. The next chapter draws on these insights to craft the theoretical framework that can accounts for the complexity of the dynamics of higher education policymaking within the QA domain in Malawi.

Chapter Four

Theoretical and analytical framework for the study of higher education QA system reform in Malawi

4.0. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the framing of critical policy analysis and the main theoretical and conceptual tools that I employed in the practical analysis of the higher education QA system reform for Malawi. The complexity and scope of policy analysis from gestation of the reform, production of policy instruments, to concerns with issues of implementation and outcomes/effects precluded any possibility of successful single theory explanation. I adopted an eclectic approach drawing on diverse theories and conceptual tools to illuminate the different aspects of the policy process reflected by the five research questions of the study, whilst being mindful of the need for coherence but equally aware of possible fractures and discontinuities. Critical Theory by Jurgen Habermas provided the overall theoretical framing for the critical policy analysis approach and the deliberative policymaking expected of Malawi as a democratic state. The policy trajectory framework by Stephen Ball and colleagues (Ball, 1994; Bowe et al., 1992) formed the foundational structure and analytical framework for examining policy processes. This was modified by incorporating concepts of 'polity network' (Rhodes, 2007); 'translation' and 'bricolage' (Campbell, 2004); Perellon (2001) framing of structure of the national QA systems; and Teelken (2012) theorisation of university actors response to external QA mechanisms. I first discuss Critical Theory and its framing of the study. Then outline the conceptualisation of policy. The third section explicates the policy trajectory framework. Finally, I demonstrate how the modified policy trajectory framework that integrates various analytical and conceptual tools was used in the study.

4.1. Framing the critical policy study: Jurgen Habermas critical theory

The fundamental premise of the study was that QA in higher education is both a technical and political process (Skolnik, 2010). My study primarily focused on the political dimension of QA. This informed my decision to locate the education policy research on higher education QA system in Malawi within the domain of critical policy studies, which allows going beyond technical-

rational assumptions to examine the political and ideological dimension of policy making processes (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).

Critical approaches to education policy research emerged in the 1980's fundamentally as the 'antithesis' to the dominant problem-solving orientation of 'traditional policy studies' which adopt the pragmatic, rational and positivist view of value-neutral social scientific knowledge geared towards application and improvement and consequently the absence of concern for politics of education (Ozga, 2021; Savage, 2021; Young & Diem, 2017). Critical policy studies aim "to understand policy processes not only in terms of input and output but more importantly in terms of the interests, values and normative assumptions – political and social that shape and inform these processes" (Fischer, et al., 2015, p. 1). This was anticipated to provide a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the complexities associated with policy processes from creation through implementation to evaluation, whilst deeply attuned to the politics of the QA system policy reform and driven by concerns with critically analysing power dynamics and challenging inequalities (Diem, Young, & Sampson, 2019).

Critical policy studies is not a homogeneous movement (Simons, Olssen, & Peters, 2009). My approach reflected Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. It aims to go beyond understanding and critique of existing conditions about how particular social structures and practices may be irrational to developing a normative vision for change (Dant, 2003). Taking a more pragmatic reflection of my potential to influence change, my view of being a critical scholar was to critically reflect and strategically probe the taken for granted institutionalised QA system reform arrangements to expose the weak threads that if pulled might provide options to change the situation (Savage, 2021). I drew on Jurgen Habermas Critical Theory, particularly his critique of technocracy and scientism in *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Habermas, 1971) to develop the methodological approach that is simultaneously 'explanatory', 'practical' and 'normative' and the *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1981) to frame the deliberative policymaking expected of Malawi as a democratic state.

In *Knowledge and Human Interest* Habermas (1971) reformulated the tradition of critical social thought by identifying three cognitive knowledge-constitutive interests and their specific dimensions of social action. He named these the ‘technical’, ‘practical’ and ‘emancipatory’ interests. The *technical interest* characterises the analytical- empirical sciences which produces knowledge for predicting and controlling the world and objectified processes and oriented towards instrumental/technical and strategic action. The *practical interest* is exemplified in hermeneutic sciences oriented towards intersubjectivity of action-oriented understanding and interpretation of human communicative action. The *emancipatory interest* is rooted in critical sciences and oriented to the pursuit of self-reflection, rational thinking and practical reason that enhances autonomy, freedom and responsibility. Habermas drawing on Freud psychoanalytic theory demonstrated that critical social sciences rooted in emancipatory interest could combine ‘causal-explanation’ characteristic of analytical-empirical sciences and ‘understanding’ associated with hermeneutic sciences to provide a comprehensive philosophy of social science that incorporates ‘explanation’, ‘understanding’ and ‘critique’ (Benton & Craib, 2011; Delanty, 1997). This set three criteria for policy research in the critical tradition: that critical policy research must be simultaneously explanatory, practical and normative (Poutanen & Kovalainen 2010). This in practice implies combining ‘causal explanation of structures’, ‘interpretive understanding’ and ‘critique’(Delanty, 1997) by integrating theory and empirical data to interpret social meaning, norms and values and evaluating social action in terms of the larger systems of meaning (Fischer, 2016).

Habermas (1981) *Theory of Communicative Action, (Volume I)* drew on philosophy of language to advocate for ‘communicative rationality’ in public policy debate as opposed to ‘instrumental or technical rationality’. Rejecting the Marxist ‘philosophy of consciousness’ for its reification of individualised subject-objective conception of reason (Michael Crotty, 1998), Habermas located reason in discourse i.e. within intersubjective communication (Benton & Craib, 2001). By ‘discourse’, Habermas meant the ability to raise and challenge an argument and reach consensus about the validity of claims (Dryzek, 2000). Habermas elucidated the notion of ‘systematically distorted communication’, expounding a ‘theory of communicative competence’ and setting conditions for the ‘ideal speech situation’ as the normative basis for Critical Theory. For Habermas the ‘ideal speech situation’ is one that is free from systematic distortion; knowledge claims follow discursive principles of validity – “universal pragmatics” (comprehensibility, integrity, legitimacy

and truth); discourse is 'unconstrained' and enables an 'unconstrained consensus' (Crotty, 1998, p. 143). This would entail stakeholders in policymaking equally engaged in rational dialogue where only the "force of a better argument" becomes a justification for policy decisions (Ulrich, 1988, p.157).

Healey (1993) criticized Habermas 'ideal speech situation' as theoretically compelling but practically unattainable. She rejected claims that difference could be resolved through the principle of universal pragmatics and that this could prevent power from determining consensus. Jackson (2002) questioned why those involved in policymaking (the powerful) would bother to consider the views, interest and concerns of the 'affected' but not involved. He argued that it was power not reason that settles disputes in public policy debates and that in the final analysis the 'better argument is produced through power and not necessarily through rational dialogue. In spite of criticisms, the work of Habermas and the linguistic turn in the 20th century philosophy has influenced the 'argumentative turn' in public policy underpinned by normative models of policymaking, practical reason and communication rationality (Dryzek, 1993, 2000; Fischer & Forester, 1993; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012, 2013). Policy scholars have focused on the deliberative policymaking in which citizens are considered 'shapers' and 'co-producers' of policy and how policy discourse shape policy processes and the manner in which social problems and policy solutions are constructed (Dryzek, 2000).

Ulrich (1988, 1994) attempted to provide the way through Habermas idealism in efforts to make policymaking socially rational by suggesting that policy study could identify policy actors based on social roles involved in any social policy. These could range from the 'involved' stakeholders including the *'client role'* linked to the basis for policy motivation; '*decision-maker role'* linked to the basis of power and source of control; and *'expert role'* linked to the basis for policy source of knowledge, to the 'affected' but not involved, linked to source of legitimation to bear the *'witness role'* about concerns of those who did not have a voice (Ulrich, 1994). The idea of 'social role' was used to classify respondents in this study in order to capture the viewpoints of different policy actors from *decisionmakers* (Ministry of Education officials; senior university managers); *experts* (QA managers at NCHE and universities, and consultants); *clients* (students) to the *affected* (academics)(Luckett, 2006).

4.2. Conceptualisation of policy

Ball (2006) observed that one of the conceptual problems with much education policy research and critical policy sociology is that often analysts fail to define conceptually what they mean by policy. The meaning of policy is taken for granted and the theoretical and epistemological dry lot tend to be built into the analytical structure. It was therefore important to clarify the understanding of policy as used in this study to reflect the breadth and complexity that the reality of policy analysis entails (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). There is no single fixed definition of the concept 'policy' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The debates about the meaning of policy is something that has been addressed by many analysts (Anderson, 2015; Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009) and this was not rehearsed in this study. The point is that how the term is used depends on the perspective of the researcher (Ozga, 2000). The study focused on higher education QA system reform for Malawi as a form of public policy, meaning government policy developed and implemented through state bureaucracies (Anderson, 2015). I adopted Ball (1993, 2006) conceptual definition of policy as 'Text' and 'Discourse' and Easton (1953) classic notion of public policy as 'the authoritative allocation of values'.

4.2.1. Policy as Texts

Policy 'text' is considered "any vehicle or medium for carrying and transmitting a policy message" (Ozga, 2000, p. 33). This includes 'official' legal texts, policy documents and commentaries which offer to make sense of the 'official' texts as well as speeches or press releases by government officials (Jones, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 and NCHE QA and accreditation standards policy documents were the key policy texts analysed in this study. Ball (1993, 1994, 2006) informed by literary theory described 'policy as text' as representations which are encoded and decoded in complex ways. According to Ball, a policy is both contested and changing, always in a state of 'becoming' for any text a plurality of readers produces a plurality of readings. Ball stressed that this conception of policy does not simply privilege the significance of reading of the policy by its subjects. It underscores that while policy makers or authors might make concerted efforts to achieve a 'correct' reading, they cannot control the meaning of policy texts. In addition, it recognizes that policies themselves, the texts are not necessarily clear, or closed or complete. As Ball put it:

> "Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate or map on to the 'wild profusion' of local practice" (Ball, 1994, p. 10).

This emphasises the strong element of agency and policy enactment. As Lingard (2021) explains, in policy enactment, policy is seen as "palimpsest, policy being 're-written' as it moves across contexts and time from formulation to enactment" in universities (p. 344). Thus, policy is much more than specific policy document or text. Policy is both process and product. This involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text and processes of implementation into practice (S. Taylor et al., 1997). With policy text viewed as the product of adhocery, contestation and compromise at various stages, how policies are acted upon in every setting, the room for manoeuvre policy actors find themselves, and the policy effects cannot be predicted (Ball, 1993, 1994, 2006). This highlights the political character of both the policy process and the policy texts (S. Taylor et al., 1997).

4.2.2. Policy as the authoritative allocation of values

Chapter three demonstrated that QA in higher education is underpinned by different and conflicting values. There are academic values about quality teaching and learning held by disciplines; managerial values about "good university management"; bureaucratic values linked to accountability and employment values about student 'customer' requirements (Luckett 2006, 2007; Brennan & Shah 2000). These have implications on who decides what criteria or measure of quality should be? Who controls the QA systems? Who is given and/or denied greater voice in the design and implementation of the QA system? and what the policy outcome/effects could be? Thus, the notion of policy as "the authoritative allocation of values" (Easton 1953) was important not least because it draws our attention to the 'who' and 'how' of policy production (Gale, 2007). Prunty (1985) argued similarly that:

> "The authoritative allocation of values draws our attention to the centrality of power and control in the concept of policy and requires us to consider not only whose values are represented in policy, but also how these values have become institutionalized" (Prunty, 1985, p. 136)

Gale (2007) explained that attending to the 'who' of policy production enables the naming of values inherent in policy, while the 'how' of policy production challenges not only the premise of rationality in policy making but also how particular actors are involved in the various contexts as

policy makers. He concluded that critical policy sociology could be well served by explanations of policy and the policy process that concern themselves with the 'who' and 'how' of policy production (Gale, 2007). The study addressed this by examining how the QA system standards were developed, the parties that were involved, the power dynamic at play and the implications of policy production processes for policy implementation.

4.2.3. Policy as discourse

"Policy as discourse" recognizes the 'bigger picture' of constraints (Henry, 1993; Ozga, 2000). As Ball (2006) argues, policy 'texts' are framed by broader discourses and chapter two demonstrated that 'neoliberalism' and 'knowledge based economy' were the dominant global policy discourses that shape QA reforms globally. Ball's concept of 'discourse' draws on Michel Foucault (1977) and is designed to suggest that policies are located and informed by a collection of interrelated policies – a 'policy ensemble'. Ball (2006, p. 48) explained that "we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensemble, collection of related policies exercise power through a production of 'truth' and 'knowledge' as discourses". The discourses mobilise truth claims and organize their own specific rationalities which constitute rather than simply reflect social reality (Ball, 2017). Thus, Ball (1994, p. 23) contended that the effects of policy is primary discursive in that policy "changes and limit our way of thinking and allows only certain voices to be heard as meaningful and authoritative". Following Michel Foucault, he noted that discourses define "what can be said and thought and also who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (Ball, 1994, p. 22). Trowler (2003) emphasised that "discourses do not only represent social reality but also disguise its created nature by denying alternatives" (p. 132). Gale (1999) introduced the notion of 'policy as ideology' and argued that "discourses must be positioned in relations to text and ideology as the avenue through which policy can be engaged both productively and analytically (p. 397). That is 'discourses' produce 'texts' as well as interpret them and they appeal to 'ideologies' while also being informed by them. The study attended to the language of policy texts – policy rhetoric and discourses as a way of seeing how policy discourses worked to privilege certain ideas about QA as well as certain speakers and excluded others. Thus, the study proceeded with the understanding of 'policy' as 'text', 'discourse' and 'the authoritative allocation of values.

4.3. Policy trajectory framework and analytical and conceptual tools

The policy trajectory framework by Ball and his colleagues (Ball, 1994; Bowe et al., 1992) was modified and adopted to provide the foundational analytical structure for the study. Bowe et al., (1992) significantly influenced by Foucauldian post-structural ideas (i.e., micro-level agency analysis) proposed the continuous 'policy cycle' strategy for analysing education policy across three loosely coupled contexts. First, the *'context of influence'* where public policy is initiated and policy discourses are constructed when interested parties exercise their influence on the policy agenda, purposes and design of policy. Second, the *context of policy text production* where policy is generated by government and articulated in the language of public good and may contain inconsistencies and contradictions. Third, the *context of practice or implementation* where 'real consequences' of policy is experienced and policy is subject to multiples interpretations. To make the policy trajectory approach theoretically comprehensive, Ball (1994) extended the framework by adding two further contexts. The *context of policy effects/outcomes* which he distinguished between first order and second order effects. The first order effects are changes in structure or practice evident within the institution and across the system while the second order effects are the impact or outcomes of these changes (Ball, 1994, 2006). Then, the *context of political strategy* concerned with identifying strategies to address unfair practices unveiled by the study to promote social justice

The conceptualisation of the policy trajectory approach has been subject to critique. Hill (2001) argued against its prioritisation of 'agency' over more 'structural' emphasis. Hatcher & Troyna (1994) disagreed with Ball's post-structural ideas about decentralisation of power in policymaking. They argued that the role of the state in controlling policy outcomes was still significant. Lingard (1996) criticised the framework for ignoring the process of globalization, while Ngo, Lingard, & Mitchell (2006) demonstrated that the three contexts of the policy cycle namely those of influence, production and practice have all been affected by globalization, which required the concept of policy trajectory to be amplified to take account of globalisation effects. Thus, the framework has been employed in many studies with some modifications (Maniku, 2008; Ngo et al., 2006; Yorke & Vidovich, 2016).

The study made three major modifications to the policy trajectory framework in line with Vidovich (2007). The analytical frame was extended from within the national state as originally conceptualized by Ball (1994), to include the global context. As demonstrated in chapter two, globalisation impact on HE QA system reforms by reconstituting the nation state education polity, towards the multi-level and pluri-scalar policy and decision-making involving networks of organizations and actors across the local, national, transnational (regional) and supranational (global) settings and propagating dominant policy discourses and ideological and structural changes in which QA policy reforms are framed by national policymakers. This affects both the policy content and process of policy production (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Second, the state-centred constraints were incorporated to a greater extent to emphasise the central role taken by government in policy, but not 'state-controlled' which implies the top-down model (Vidovich, 2007). This was necessary in the context of Malawi where the QA reform was mainly driven by the government through the Ministry of Education and regulated by the national QA agency – the NCHE. The third modification brought together the structural macro-level analysis of the QA system reform and the micro-level agency investigation that takes into account people's perceptions and local complexities by giving greater attention to the dynamic two-way interaction of 'structure' and 'agency'(Hay, 2002).

4.4. Application of the modified trajectory framework: analytical/ conceptual tools

The application of the modified policy trajectory framework focused on the contexts of 'influence', 'policy texts production', 'practice or implementation' and 'policy effects or outcomes' (Table 4).

Table 4: Policy trajectory framework for HE QA system reform for Malawi

Global or International dimension ⟷ National & Local dimension	Policy Trajectory Framework	Primary Focus	Research Question (s)
	Context of influence	Problematisation and setting the QA System Reform Agenda	1. What external (global) and internal (national) factor influenced the need for the formal QA system for higher education to be identified, justified and placed onto the government policy agenda?
	Context of policy text production	Development of QA system policy instruments	2. What are the key characteristics of the policy texts relating to the national QA system for higher education in Malawi and how were they produced?
	Context of practice or implementation	Implementation/operation of the nation QA System	3. How does the national QA system operate to assure quality of higher education in Malawi?
	Context of policy outcome or effects	QA System reform outcomes/effects	4. What has been the influence of the national QA system and procedures on practices within the universities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation? 5. How do higher education institutions respond to QA mechanism and what structural factors constitute the implementation gap?

4.4.1. Context of influence

The analytic for the context of influence was the historical antecedents and pressure that led to the gestation of the formal QA system for HE in Malawi. I examined key actors and the role they played either directly or indirectly to influence the QA system agenda and the structural dynamics, external (global) and internal (national/local) that led to the 'problematisation' of quality necessitating the development of formal QA system for HE in Malawi. The concept of 'policy network' which refers to "a set of formal and informal institutional linkages between government and other actors structured around shared interest in public policymaking" (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1244) was deployed to trace the QA agenda to different actors beginning with those acknowledged in NCHE policy documents, and/or mentioned during interviews. The network graph for Malawi was designed with Gephi software and presented in Figure 1. The network nodes are the actors (individuals or organizations) connected by edges. The colour and size of the nodes and edges indicated the dominance of the actors and the dominant relationalities, respectively.

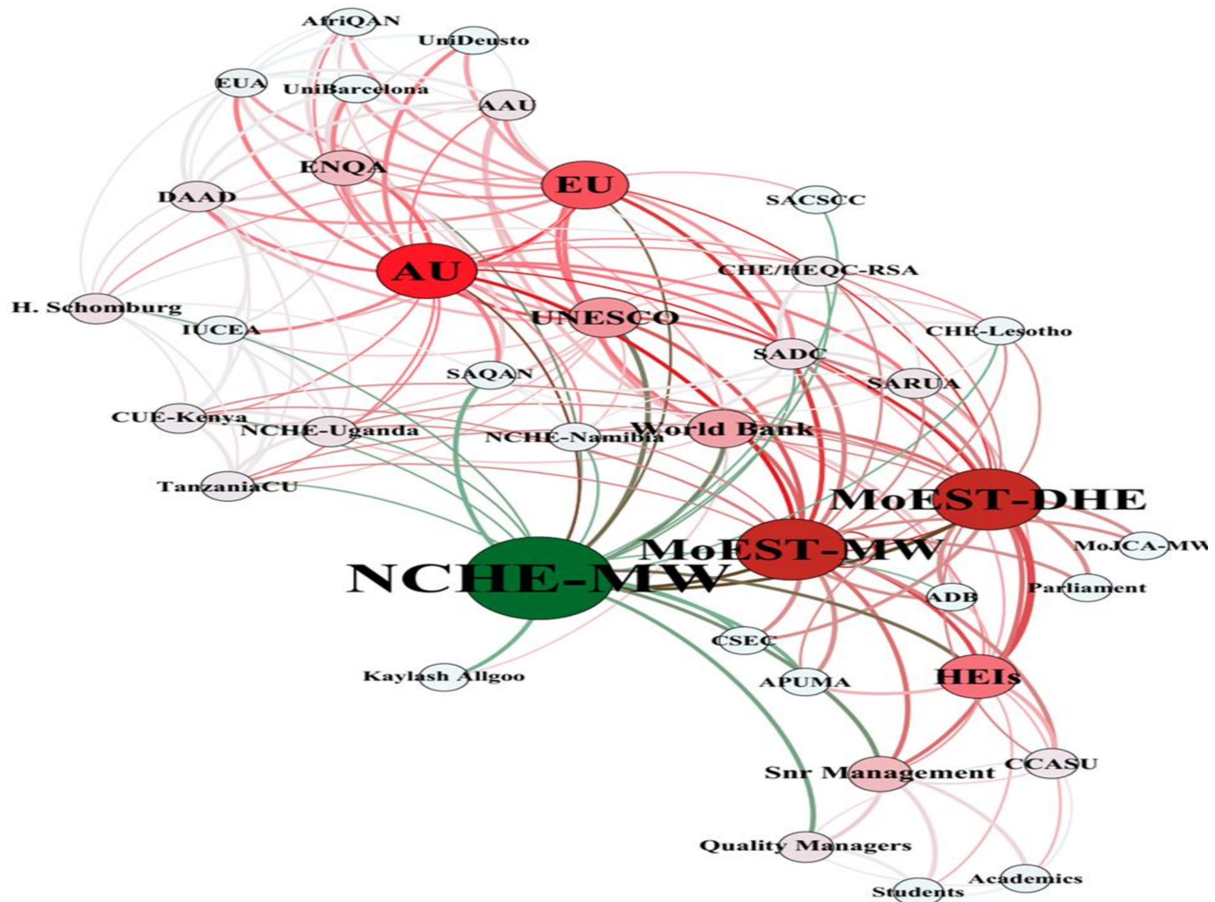

Figure 1: Higher education QA policy network graph for Malawi

It was possible to identify the World Bank, UNESCO and European Union (EU) operating at global/international level and African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) at regional and sub-regional level respectively as the dominant actors that influenced the QA agenda in Malawi. Within the country, the QA system reform was initiated by Government through the Ministry of Education (MoEST) and its Directorate of Higher Education (DHE), with encouragement from higher education institutions (HEIs). The policy network formed the 'policy technology' (Adhikary & Lingard, 2018) to gather documentary evidence on those key global and regional actors through searching on the internet to provide in-depth explanation of their activities, cartography of power, and how they contributed in raising the profile of the QA system reform in Malawi and activating policy change.

4.4.2. Context of policy text production

The ‘policy instruments’ steering the QA system for higher education in Malawi formed the object of analysis. I examined approaches and processes that were followed in the QA system development, the key policy actors that were involved and the power tension associated with the policy process. Chapter two argued that with globalisation it has become inevitable for nation states when developing QA systems to look ‘outward’ towards supranational (global/international) and ‘transnational’ (regional) QA frameworks, standards and procedures and to other countries perceived to be succeeding for prevailing norms and practices (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011). Education policy studies should focus on how the models and frameworks are translated, re-contextualised and enacted in specific national settings (Ball, 1998; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007). I adopted the concepts of ‘translation’ and ‘bricolage’(Campbell, 2004) to examine the extent the QA system developed for higher education in Malawi was mutually informed by international and national/local practices. Campbell (2004) asserted that ‘bricolage’ takes place when policy development recombines principles and practices already existing in the national system to create innovations. This can be substantive, based on the logic of instrumentality, implying the recombination would successfully address the problem, or symbolic, based on the logic of appropriateness, where the general aim is to conform to prevailing norms. Translation often associated with globalisation and ‘travelling’ of policy ideas is the enactment of policy by combining new elements originating from elsewhere with locally existing principles and institutional practices. This involves more than transplanting international models; it demands modification of imported elements to fit the local context (Campbell, 2004).

4.4.3. Context of policy practice or implementation

The analytic for the context of practice according to Ball is the role of agency in policy enactment. The main assumption is that policy is not simply received and implemented by practitioners; policy issues are subject to various interpretation (Ngo et al., 2006). As Ball (2017) put it, “policies are contested, interpreted and enacted in the arena of practice and the rhetoric, texts and meaning of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practice” (p. 10). But to comprehensively understand how the QA system for higher education in Malawi operates in practice, the implementation analysis must also examine the structural architecture put in place to achieve strategic ends (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002). Scholars provided insights on the relevant

structural features produced through cross-national analysis of QA systems of developed and developing countries that should be considered when examining the implementation of the national QA system (Perellon, 2007; Van Damme, 2002; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). I drew on Perellon (2001, 2007) conceptual framing that national QA systems for higher education are formed by the ideational dimension (policy beliefs and objectives), translated into policy instruments (material dimension) consisting of the: QA control body; Areas covered by QA; Procedures; and Uses of QA information. Perellon (2007) stressed that these provide the general structure of the QA policy domain, but the actual response may reflect tension among stakeholders struggling to impose their ideas about 'policy beliefs' and how the QA system should be implemented (policy instruments). The conceptual framework was used to analyse the structural architecture of the QA system in Malawi and how they were interpreted by various policy actors and carried out in practice.

4.4.4. Context of policy outcome or effects

Stephen Ball distinguished the analytical focus for *context of policy effects/outcomes* between first order and second order effects. The first order effects are changes in practice or structure evident within the institution and across the system while the second order effects are the impact or outcomes of these changes (Ball, 1994, 2006). I examined the first order effects, particularly changes in structures and practices that might have taken place within universities and across the higher education system resulting from the first cycle of assessment and accreditation by NCHE. The analysis focused on three core areas covered by the NCHE QA system: institutional governance and management; academic programmes; and research and publications (NCHE, 2015c). Chapter three suggested that QA reforms in higher education manifest in complex behavioural responses by university actors. Some reject them or react with ambivalence, some find ways of accommodating them, while others accept and feel they are necessary to meet new challenges (Gallagher, 2014; Henkel, 2000; Pham, 2018; Salto, 2018). Newton (2002) and Okoche (2017) noted that given that much of the writing seek to justify rather than problematize QA systems, resistance is often described as a practical difficulty requiring a remedy instead of a social phenomenon requiring critical inquiry and explanation. Taking an 'appreciative' rather than 'correctionist' position and rejecting the dualism of 'resistance' versus 'compliance', Teelken (2012) theorised that university actors were more likely to respond through three coping mechanisms: 'symbolic compliance', 'professional pragmatism' and 'formal instrumentality'

already discussed in chapter three. This conceptual framing was appropriate to the study of organizational changes processes from the perspective of university actors (Pham, 2018) hence it was used to explain university actors' perceptions and responses to the QA system mechanisms in Malawi.

4.5. Conclusion

The study drew strength from a certain degree of eclecticism in pursuit of the most appropriate analytical and conceptual tools. As Ball (1994, 2006) pointed out and consistent with critical social research which is "not bounded by a single (grand) theoretical perspective" (Troyna, 1994, p. 72), I have argued that the complexity and scope of my study from gestation of the QA system, development of policy instruments to concerns with issues of implementation and outcomes precluded any possibility of successful single theory explanation. Jurgen Habermas Critical Theory framed the critical policy analysis approach for the study and deliberative policymaking expected of Malawi as a democratic state. The modified policy trajectory framework that takes into account the impact of globalisation on QA system reforms, state-centred constraints and the dynamic two-way interaction of structure and agency provided the analytical and conceptual framework for studying the development of the higher education QA system in Malawi. This was used in examining policy processes across four loosely connected contexts of 'policy influence', 'policy text production', 'policy practice or implementation', and 'policy outcome/effects'. The next chapter discusses the methodological approach of the study.

Chapter Five
Research Methodology

5.0. Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology for my study. I first explore the philosophical paradigm informing my research design and approach. A justification to locate the study within the critical or transformative paradigm and adopt the qualitative research tradition is presented. The choice and rationale of case study methodology is described in the following section, including an explication of the 'multiple case study' design and how it was deployed. The subsequent section discusses the research methods and procedural issues. Purposive sampling, pilot study and data collection methods particularly, semi-structured interviews and document analysis are outlined. The data analysis techniques adopted by the study namely: thematic analysis and content analysis are examined, followed by a reflection on ethical issues and measures undertaken to ensure quality and trustworthiness of the study.

5.1. Critical philosophical paradigm

Philosophical paradigm in social sciences broadly means "a set of assumptions about the world and about what constitute proper techniques and topics for inquiring into that world" (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 16). This encompasses three major components: ontology, epistemology and methodology. Ontology relates to the study of being or existence (Crotty, 1998). In research this constitute assumptions about the nature of social reality (Morrison, 2012). Epistemology is concerned with the nature and form of knowledge (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). This involves assumptions about how knowledge can be created and the criteria for defending legitimate claims to knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Punch, 2009). Methodology concerns how the researcher goes about finding out what can be known and the methods or techniques used for studying reality (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stressed that researchers must take a position and be explicit about their ontological and epistemological assumptions and how this has influenced the decisions made in the research process, including choice of methodology. The theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter based on the premise that QA reforms in higher education are underpinned by normative and ideological issues and conflicting values, located my education policy research within the domain of critical policy study.

Critical or 'transformative' paradigm (Mertens, 2015) espoused my philosophical position. The critical paradigm accepts the following premises of both 'positivism' and 'interpretivism': the need for causal theories to ensure objective explanation and the need for interpretive descriptions to ensure inter-subjective understanding (Cohen et al., 2018; Delanty, 1997). However, critical paradigm is also concerned with 'deep structures' beyond empirical observation to understand how social policy agendas are set and how power is exercised through systems of beliefs, values, assumptions and ideologies (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Fischer, 2007, 2016). Following the critical paradigm, my study was premised on the historical realism ontology (Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, 1994; Howell, 2015) which maintains that "reality exist outside the mind" (Crotty, 1998, p. 11) but is socially and historically constructed (Elshafie, 2013). According to Guba, E. G., & Lincoln (1994) critical paradigm believes that:

> "Reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic and gender values and crystallized (or reified) over time into a series of social structures [with causal powers and existing independent of our consciousness] that are taken as 'real', natural and immutable" (p. 105).

This implies that 'by examining the context in which any social action takes place', social reality can be known (Davey & Liefooghe, 2004). Recognizing that policy development is an extremely complex and often contradictory process, critical education policy studies significantly attend to the complex system and environment in which policy is designed and implemented and the evolution of policy over time (Diem et al., 2019; Diem, Young, Welton, Mansfield, & Lee, 2014; Young & Diem, 2017). I made attempts to capture the full complexity of policy contexts in which the higher education QA system reform for Malawi was conceived, developed and implemented, those involved and how causal powers of structures (i.e., structural dynamics at global and national level) shaped the QA reform. Critique was at the centre of the study (Budd, 2008), questioning taken for granted institutionalised QA system reform arrangements to expose the weak threads and relationship of domination (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000) and examining the dynamic interaction between 'structure and agency' (Hay, 2002). This included attending to language: the different interpretation of QA standards and NCHE regulatory policy texts; 'the contested nature of meaning; and the impact of these readings on different policy actors', since within the critical policy tradition, policy texts '(words) are not fixed in their meaning and the ways in which they are used has an impact on our understanding of reality' (Ball, 1994, 2006).

Critical or transformative paradigm's epistemological position considers knowledge as socially constructed, subjective and value-laden (Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, 1994) but its meaning is influenced by power relations (Elshafie, 2013). That is 'what counts as worthwhile and acceptable knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of advocates of that knowledge, which privileges some views of reality while underrepresent others' (Cohen, et al.,, 2011, p. 33). Mertens, (2015) stressed that the meaning of knowledge must be interpreted from the prism of cultural and power lenses involved in the determination of legitimate knowledge informing public policies. The critical paradigm based on 'the link between power, knowledge and language' claims that 'the most powerful policy actors are most likely to be heard and that their interpretation of reality is more likely to be accepted' (Davey & Liefooghe, 2004; Chikazinga, 2019). I made some efforts to interrogate 'who decided what counts as quality?' 'Who decided what criteria or measures of quality should be?' 'Who controls the quality system?' And for whom was the quality evaluation done. I consciously attended to views, interest and concerns of academic staff within universities among the policy actors that were 'affected' by the QA system reform but not involved in policy development. The critical paradigm rejects the separation of the researcher from the subject of study (Howell, 2015). My approach to inquiry was more transactional in nature (Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, 1994). I engaged with various policy actors in a critical dialectical dialogue when inquiring about the QA system reform (Scotland, 2012) such that the knowledge constructed in this study was invaluably shaped by my interpretation of viewpoints, values and belief of respondents and documentary evidence (Elshafie, 2013).

5.2. Qualitative approach to education policy research

The qualitative research approach was judged to be the most appropriate for this study, given the intentions to focus on the social and political contexts that shape QA system reforms in higher education and the desire to explore views and perspectives of different policy actors to understand the development of the QA system for higher education in Malawi. Critical policy studies mostly draw on qualitative methodologies as they are sensitive to the context and process, offering the opportunity to provide in-depth and holistic description of complex phenomena (Diem et al., 2014; Ozga, 2021; Young & Diem, 2017). The focus of qualitative inquiry on understanding and interpreting meaning of events and social phenomena in the natural setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) from those policy actors who engage in them is unsurpassed for purposes of doing policy

research (Heck, 2004). Qualitative inquiry's naturalistic preference to study people, events and phenomena in their natural setting and construct knowledge about experiences in real situation was necessary to ensure that data and analysis reflected what was really happening with the QA system at national (NCHE) level and within universities. Qualitative research is process oriented in nature and examines events and meanings as they unfold to understand the contingencies that influence the manner in which such events evolve (Heck, 2004; Wood, 2006). The concern is with the 'how' rather than with the outcomes or products of an activity (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was particularly important to this study which attempted to understand how the QA system for higher education in Malawi was developed and is implemented, and how the QA system was interpreted and acted on by policy actors within particular universities (Heck, 2004). The major limitation of qualitative inquiry however, is that its focus on depth rather than breadth (Yin, 2018) gives rise to difficulties with the ability to make generalizations(Creswell, 2014). But, given the sufficient detailing of the setting of the study, it was anticipated that readers would make their own judgements about the relevance of theoretical propositions generated by the study to their setting (Yorke & Vidovich, 2016).

5.3. Case study methodology

The critical paradigm and qualitative research encourages methodological reflexivity, where the theoretical propositions and study problem informs the choice of methodology (Budd, 2008). Case study strategy was chosen among the wide variety of methodologies in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2013) since my primary aim was to understand 'the case' of the development of the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi regulated by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). Yin (2014) defined case study as

> "An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and which may 'use multiple sources of evidence' and 'theoretical propositions' to guide data collection and analysis" (p. 16-17).

Punch & Oancea (2014) asserted that case study research aims to understand in-depth and holistically, the complex social phenomena within their natural contexts. Descombe (2010) stated that case studies tend to be 'holistic' to emphasize the detailed working of complex social processes, which provide an opportunity to explain 'why' certain outcomes might happen rather

than just emphasizing on outcomes. Formal QA system for higher education in Malawi was a contemporary phenomenon and case study strategy was deemed suitable for a study of higher education QA system development processes that attempted to capture the complexity of the policy contexts in which the QA system reform emerged by applying analytical tools of the modified policy trajectory framework (Heck, 2004; Merriam, 2009).

Case study research is however, often viewed with circumspection (Gerring, 2007) mainly based on the singularity nature of case study which is challenged in terms of reliability and generalizability of findings (Punch & Oancea, 2014). However, Yin (2014) stressed that the goal of case study is "to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalizations) and not to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations)" (p. 40). Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 6) contended that a case study can be generalized "depending on the case one is speaking of and how it has been chosen". As Descombe (2010) explained, although a case study might be unique is some respects, it also represents a single example of a broader class of things and the extent to which it can be generalized to other examples in the class, depend on how far the case study is similar to others of its type. This study however, was designed to optimize understanding rather than to generalize findings to other cases within or beyond Malawi (Stake, 2005). Readers may reflect on the findings and make their own judgments about potential transferability to their settings (Cohen et al., 2018; Yorke & Vidovich, 2016).

5.3.1. Multiple case study design

Case study design is presented in various ways which somehow creates conceptual confusion (Merriam, 2009). Stake (2005) claims that case study is a "choice of what to be studied – a case within a bounded system" (p. 443). Many others view case study holistically as a choice of what to be studied, a comprehensive strategy of inquiry or methodology and a product of inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Yin, 2014, 2018). I embraced case study as both a methodology and object of study. Case study designs can be categorized as *'single case study'*, where the focus is within the case or '*multiple case studies' or 'collective case studies'* (Stake 2005) which focuses both within and across cases (Yin, 2014, 2018).

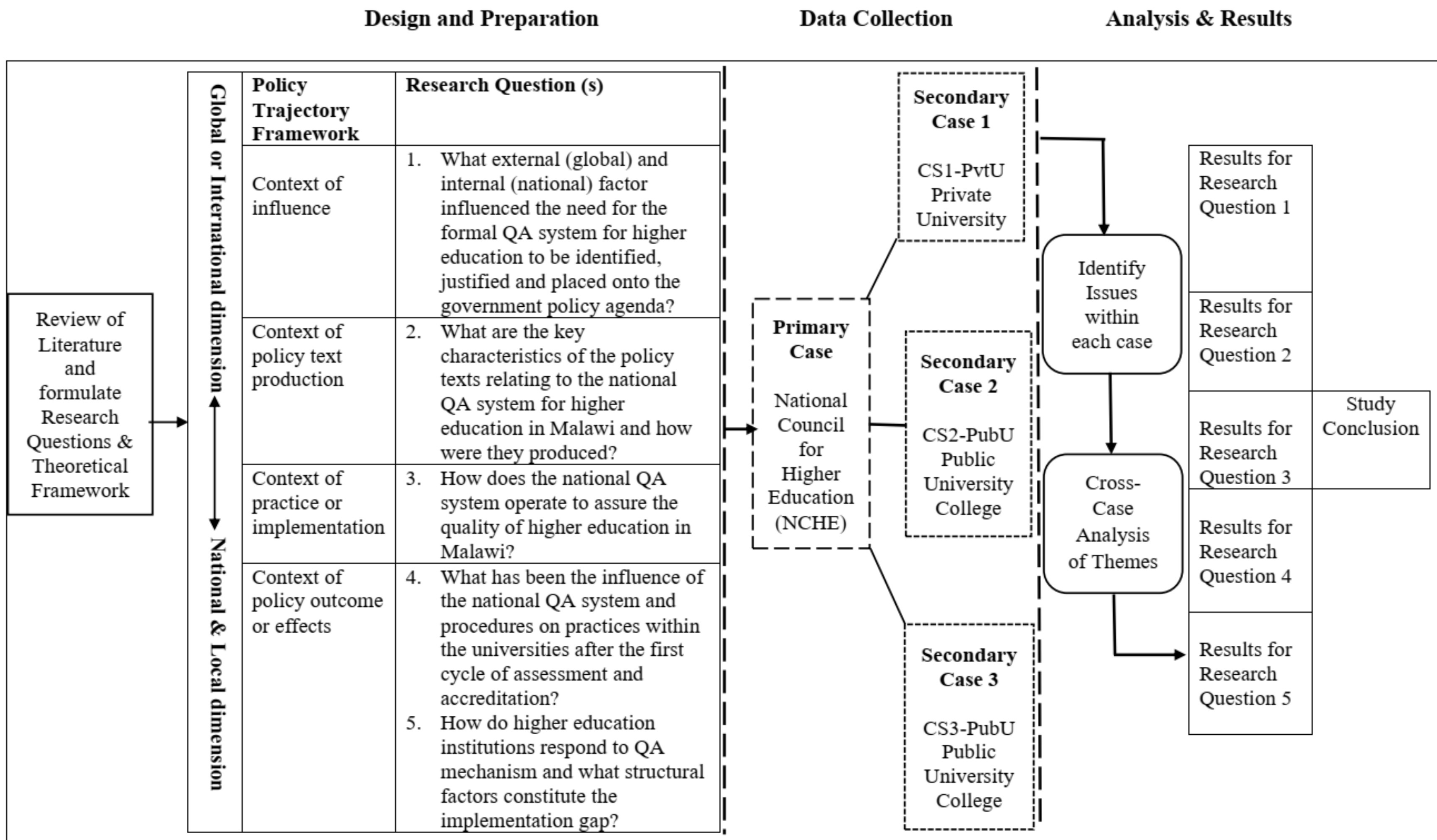

Figure 2: Multiple case study design strategy for the study – adapted from Yin (2014, p. 60)

The design can be '*intrinsic case study'* where the single 'case' is investigated for its own sake to better understand its uniqueness or ordinariness or '*instrumental case study'* where a single case or multiple cases are examined to gain insight into a wider issue or theoretical question; the case itself is secondary and plays a supportive role (Creswell, 2013; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Stake, 1998). The instrumental case study is still examined in-depth, its context scrutinized and activities detailed but all because this helps to advance understanding of another intent, which is the issues of concern (Stake, 1998, 2005). Yin (2014) outlined four major case study design components: (1) identification of study questions or problems, (2) theoretical and conceptual framework to direct attention to what should be examined, (3) selection of the 'case' or unit of analysis, and (4) the analytic strategy for the case study evidence and format for reporting.

My study used the 'multiple case study design' presented in Figure 2, which adapted the structure advocated by Yin (2014). The object of study or unit of analysis was the policy process for the development of the QA system for higher education in Malawi understood within the globalizing environment of QA reforms. NCHE which was inextricably linked to the emergence of the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi formed the primary case study and principal focus of the entire investigation to gather data and in-depth understanding of the contexts of 'influence', 'policy text production', 'practice or implementation' and 'outcomes or effect'.

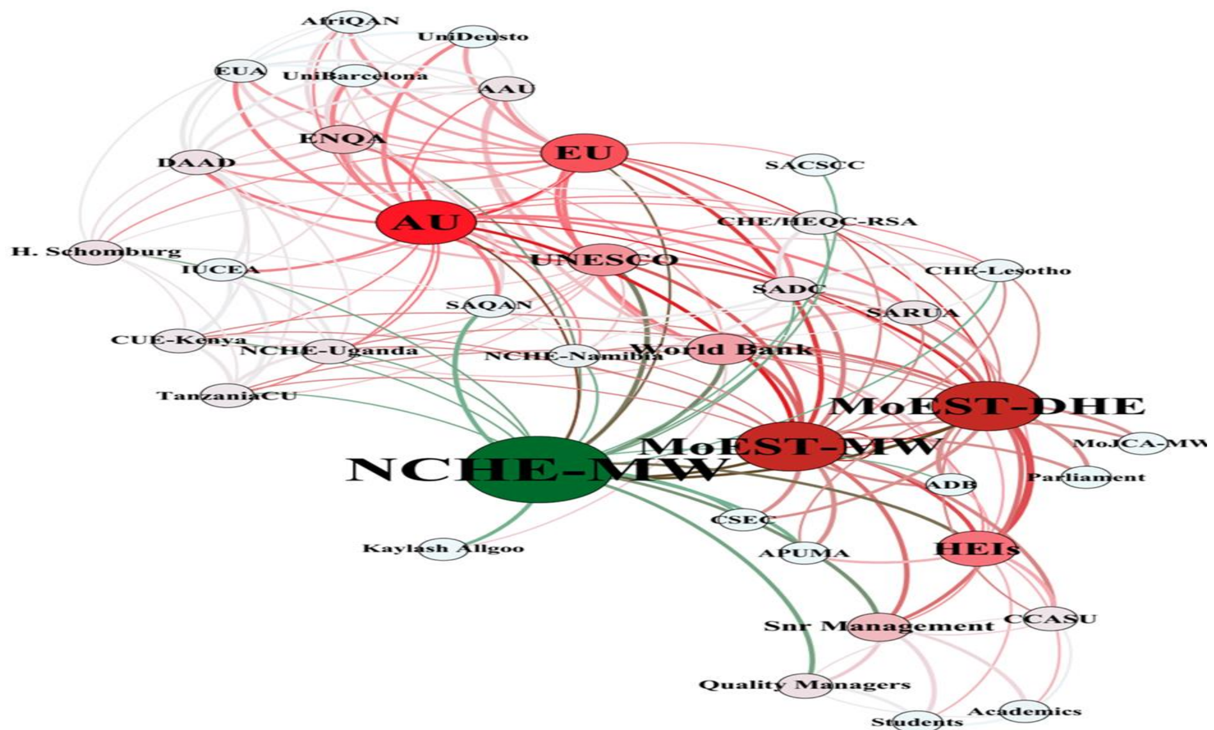

Figure 1: Higher education QA policy network graph for Malawi

Chapter four stated that the modified policy trajectory framework situated the case study of NCHE within the global context of QA reforms. Policy network technology was used to track dominant actors (individuals and organizations) at global, regional and national/local level that directly or indirectly influenced the development of the higher education QA system in Malawi. This culminated into the network graph presented in Figure 1. The World Bank, UNESCO and European Union (EU) at global/international level; African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) at regional level; and the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST); its Directorate of Higher Education (DHE); Malawi Parliament; and higher education institutions (HEIs) at national/local level were identified as dominant actors that shaped the creation of NCHE and formal QA system for higher education in Malawi. Documentary evidence on those key global and regional actors was used to explicate their activities, cartography of power and how they contributed to the development of the formal QA system and activate policy change.

As NCHE is responsible for regulating the QA system and higher education sector in Malawi, its functions are largely considered based on circumstances that prevail at the micro-level within HEIs. This echoed analysts that have called for "close up studies" or "insider research into views from below" (Newton, 2002, p. 59; Cardoso, et al., 2016 p. 962). They embrace the view that when QA systems developed at national level 'hit the ground', the achievement of outcomes remain a localized context-specific process. This requires attending to actors within universities as both 'makers' and 'shapers' of QA system reforms (Cardoso, et. al. 2018; Cardoso *et al.*, 2019) to provide the much needed insights on issues of QA system implementation and outcomes (Newton, 2010; Saarinen, 2010). It was on this basis that the three purposively selected HEIs formed the secondary and '*instrumental case studies'* to provide 'views from below' about the QA system development processes and further examine the QA system implementation and outcomes. Following Stake (2005), the case studies of universities were included "to advance understanding of another intent" (p. 445): i.e. detailed description and interpretation of the development, implementation and outcome of the national QA system and maximize what could be learned (Maniku, 2008).

A brief profile of the case universities is necessary to justify the selection and provide the context for subsequent interpretation of findings. CS1-PvtU private university (Secondary Case 1) is the second oldest private university in Malawi established by the Catholic Church in 2004 but admitted its first students on 4th August 2006. It was first accredited by the government of

Malawi in 2009, then by NCHE in 2016. The university has six faculties namely: Commerce; Education; Nursing and Midwifery; Social Sciences; Theology; and Law, which housed 32 academic departments offering one postgraduate and 32 undergraduate programmes with a total enrolment of 1751 students in 2018. The university has three newly established research centres. There are Centre for Legal Studies; Centre for Socio-Theological Studies and Centre for Governance and Diplomatic Studies (Catholic University of Malawi, 2018).

CS2-PubU public university college (Secondary Case 2) was established in 1979 as one of the four constituent colleges of the oldest public university, the University of Malawi, until 4th May 2021 when the university underwent a delinking, which turned constituent colleges into three standalone public universities (refer to chapter two). CS2-PubU has since been merged with another constituent college, the College of Medicine, establishing the Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KuHES). During data collection in 2020, the institution had four faculties: Nursing; Midwifery, neonatology and reproductive health; Community and Mental Health; and Applied health Studies, which housed eleven academic department offering 14 undergraduate and 9 postgraduate programmes, with the total student enrolment of 1189 in 2018 (Kadzamira, 2018). There was one research centre - the centre for nursing, midwifery and reproductive health research. The institution was accredited by NCHE in 2017 although it has historically been regulated and accredited by the professional agency – the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi.

CS3-PubU public university college (Secondary Case 3) was the largest of the four constituent colleges of the University of Malawi established in 1965 until 4th May 2021 when the university underwent a delinking. Data from the university website indicated that the institution described itself as a teaching and research university and has five faculties: Science; Law; Education; Social Sciences; and Humanities. There are 25 academic departments falling under these different faculties offering 21 undergraduate and 70 postgraduate programmes, with the total student enrolment of 7494 in 2018 (Kadzamira, 2018). The institution has five national research centres: the Centre for LEAD Southern and Eastern Africa, Centre for Education Training and Research, Centre for Language Studies, Centre for Peace and Conflict Management, and Centre for Social Research. As a historically autonomous institutions with strong liberal and collegial traditions, the institution had never been regulated by an external body, until NCHE was established and it was the last among public universities to be accredited in 2020 (NCHE, 2020b).

CS1-PvtU private university was selected based on the belief that it could provide important insights for being the second oldest private university and the first university in Malawi to undergo accreditation by NCHE. The other reason was to seek the voice of both categories of the higher education system (private and public) in view of the rapid growth of private universities in Malawi. CS2-PubU public university college was where I work and was selected based on ease of access to lessen practical and logistical challenges (Creswell, 2013; Punch, 2009), while CS3-PubU public university college was selected based on its initial resistance to the QA system reform to draw insights from the unusual manifestations (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Moreover, "single-case studies are usually criticized for the uniqueness or artifactual conditions" and multiple case studies attempt to lessen such criticism and skepticism by demonstrating issues across more varied range of circumstances (Yin, 2014, p. 108). This provide analytical gains as potential variations and differences can be explored between the cases due to their different traditions (Creswell, 2007, 2013).

When multiple case studies are chosen the conventional analytic strategy and typical format of reporting results is to first undertake a 'within-the case analysis' and provide detailed report about each case, followed by cross-case analysis of themes and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). However, although multiple case studies were conducted, the overall study design did not follow what Yin (2014, 2018) calls the replication logic, which is analogous to multiple experiments that may lead to the development of theory about similar (or dissimilar) collection of cases. The secondary cases were meant to play a supportive role to understand the broader issue of concern, which was the higher education QA system reform trajectory. The analytical strategy involved preliminary 'within-the case' analyses to identify key issues and themes within each case. But results were drawn from the cross-case analysis of common themes to interpret the four contexts of the QA system trajectory framework, which formed the results chapters (Creswell, 2013).

5.3.2. Sampling participants

A key task of the study was to select policy actors who could best assist in understanding the development trajectory of the QA system for higher education in Malawi. Punch & Oancea (2014) pointed out that sampling in qualitative research is a deliberate process based on the purposes, research questions and theoretical framework of the study. What is most important is to sample strategically rather than representationally (Berg, 2001). Non-probability sampling strategy is most appropriate to qualitative research, which targets a particular group (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016). It does not aim to achieve representativeness to a wider population, but to represent itself (Cohen, et al., 2018). Many types of non-probability sampling strategies could be identified such as convenience, quota, purposive or judgemental, dimensional and snowball or chain sampling. Each type has its own characteristics, strengths, limitations and scope of application (Cohen, et al., 2007, 2018; Merriam, 2009).

The study adopted purposive sampling strategy, which involves selecting respondents based on their typicality or possession of characteristics most suited to provide data on the studied phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018). The major weakness of this strategy however, is that it is deliberately selective and may be potentially biased especially, if not employed with predetermined selection criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, according to research questions and the policy trajectory framework guiding the study, I sought to select 'information-rich' policy actors, who had been predominantly 'involved' in the development of policy instruments for the QA system at national level and those 'affected' by the implementation of the QA system at local level within universities.

Table 5 provide an overview of the study sample. A preliminary review of NCHE key documents indicated that policy production processes evolved in two major phases. The first phase was the enactment of NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 establishing NCHE by the government through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), Directorate of Higher education (DHE) led by the Minister from 2005 to 2011. Due to high turn-over of Ministers and Principal Secretaries (i.e., the Minister of Education who championed NCHE Bill was at the time of this study the former state president of Malawi), I decided to use records (Parliament Hansards) on tabling of NCHE bill by the Minister and deliberations by Members of Parliament obtained from Malawi Parliament. But I sampled senior MoEST officials (director and deputy director) in the Directorate of Higher Education (DHE) including the former director during the period 2005 to 2011. The second phase was the development of QA standards and frameworks and implementation of the national QA system by NCHE. I sampled the first chairperson of NCHE board, senior NCHE secretariat officials and members of national technical working groups acknowledged in NCHE documents to have been engaged to draft QA standards and frameworks for the QA system.

Table 5: Sampling frame: institution, criteria and Code

Institution	Criterion	Code	Sample
Ministry of Education (MoEST), Directorate of Higher Education (DHE)	Director and Deputy Director	MoEST01 – MoEST03	3
National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)	Board Chairperson and Senior Officials (Managers)	NCHE 01 – NCHE05	5
	National technical working groups (NTWG) members	NTWG 01-Dean NTWG 02-QAD	2
Civil Society Education Coalition (CSEC)	Director	CSO-01	1
		Sub-total	**11**
CS1-PvtU Private University	Senior University Managers		
	Vice Chancellor	CS1-PvtU-VC	1
	Registrar	CS1-PvtU-R	1
	Quality Assurance Director	CS1-PvtU-QAD	1
	Academic Unit Managers		
	Dean of faculty	CS1-PvtU-Dean01-03	3
	Head of Department	CS1-PvtU-HoD	1
	Academic Staff		
	Professor/Associate	-	-
	Senior lecturer	CS1-PvtU-Snrlect	1
	Lecturer	CS1-PvtU-Lect-DC	1
		Sub-total	**9**
CS2-PubU Public University College	Senior University Managers		
	Vice Chancellor	CS-PubU-VC	1
	College Principal/vice	CS2-PubU-VP	1
	Registrar	CS2-PubU-R	1
	Quality Assurance Director	CS2-PubU-QAD	1
	Academic Unit Managers		
	Dean of faculty	CS2-PubU-Dean	1
	Head of Department	CS2-PubU-HoD	1
	Academic Staff		
	Professor/Associate	CS2-PubU-AssProf	1
	Senior lecturer	CS2-PubU-SnrLect01-02	2
	Lecturer	CS2-PubU-Lect	1
		Sub-total	**10**
CS3-PubU Public University College	Senior University Managers		
	College Principal/vice	-	-
	Registrar	CS3-PubU-R	1
	Quality Assurance Director	CS3-PubU-QAD	1
	Academic Unit Managers		
	Dean of faculty	CS3-PubU-Dean01-02	2
	Head of Department	CS3-PubU-HoD	1
	Academic Staff		
	Professor/Associate	CS3-PubU-Prof01-03	3
	Senior lecturer	CS3-PubU-SnrLec01-02	2
		Sub-total	**10**
		Overall Total	**40**

At university level, sampling was done in three case studies to further explore the national QA system development processes and influence of the QA system on practices within universities.

The university actors were first selected based on their position/rank. It was believed senior university managers were most likely to be involved in policy development at national level. Second, for being acknowledged in NCHE documents to be part of technical working groups. Third, for having been with the university for at least four years to ensure that they have full appreciation of changes that might have occurred resulting from the implementation of the national QA system. The sample comprised senior university managers (vice chancellors, college principals/vice, registrars and QA directors); academic unit managers (deans of faculty and heads of department) and ordinary academic staff (professors, senior lecturers, and lecturers). The total planned sample was 50, but I ended up with 40 accessible policy actors. The principal/vice principal of CS3-PubU public university, three deans of faculty and six heads of department across the case universities declined to participate and/or could not give an appointment date for interviews after several attempts to book them, citing fear of contracting Covid-19 despite that Malawi had not registered any single Covid-19 case at the time. This was somehow exacerbated by stigma that I had come from the United Kingdom where Covid-19 fatality was very high.

5.3.3. Research methods

Research methods are the procedures and techniques that were used to gather and analyse data related to research questions informed by the modified policy trajectory framework (Crotty, 1998). This included a pilot study; interviews and document analysis among the four main data collection methods in qualitative case study, the others being observation and visual methods (Cohen et al., 2018; Punch & Oancea, 2014); thematic analysis of interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012); and content analysis of documents (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2004).

5.3.3.1. Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted as the exploratory phase before formal data collection. This was aimed at field-testing interview schedules to establish content validity and conducting thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis of policy documents to draw insights on data analysis and reporting of results according to research questions and policy trajectory framework (Creswell, 2014). I interviewed one senior lecturer and head of department at CS2-PubU public university and selected one key NCHE policy document from which I conducted thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis respectively and produced a pilot study report **(Appendix I).** The pilot study proved helpful to reflect on my research design and revise interview questions. I noted the participant had difficulties to understand some questions

because they were framed in more technical terms; other questions were redundant- they generated information already provided, while some proved to be less relevant. Interview schedules were accordingly revised to improve clarity and ordering of questions, while redundant and irrelevant questions were discarded. Critical discourse analysis provided an important avenue to go beyond the level of sentences and interrogate how language was used in policy texts to persuade readers to accept the QA system reform and conceal the tensions and changing power relations between the QA agency (NCHE) and HEIs. However, it proved difficult to integrate results from critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis which perhaps explained why some scholars presented them separately (Luckett, 2006b; Yorke & Vidovich, 2016). Whilst critical discourse analysis was the most appropriate technique to analyse documentary evidence, separating results from the two analyses proved redundant. Thus, qualitative content analysis of documents was deployed to ably integrate findings with thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009). The pilot study also revealed that analyzing policy processes by focusing on a single NCHE policy document was inadequate to provide a holistic understanding of the QA system development, since different approaches were followed in developing specific policy instruments. Therefore, I decided to collect data on the 'ensemble' of NCHE policy instruments and analyse the production processes by grouping them based on the approach followed in policy development.

5.3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Punch and Oancea (2014) asserted that 'to understand people's construction of reality about social phenomena, we would do well to ask them' (p. 182). Interview is considered an effective way for studying people's understanding of meanings in their lived world with respect to interpreting their own perspective of the described phenomena (Brinkhmann & Kvale, 2015). Thus, interview with policy actors was the primary method of gathering evidence to understand their perspectives on why and how the national QA system for higher education in Malawi was developed; how it operates; and the influence it was having in the higher education sector.

Punch & Oancea (2014) described a continuum of interview strategies ranging from highly structured (standardized) to those which are completely unstructured. Gubrium *et al.*, (2012) and Brinkhmann & Kvale (2015) indicated that highly standardized interviews maximize comparison, but may neglect depth and complexity of policy processes while unstructured interviews may capture both complexity and multi-perspectives of policy actors, yet pose difficulties to retain control over the direction and content of interviews. I conducted semi-

structured interviews using interview guides or schedules informed by my research questions and policy trajectory framework **(Appendix II).** This offered a compromise position for me to retain some control over the direction of interviews in order to focus on issues that were deemed important to my study and probe far beyond the answers with emergent questions, giving latitude for unique contributions of participants (Cohen, et al., 2018). It also permitted broadly similar themes to be explored and compared across participants and provide in-depth information on the QA system development processes without predetermining the results (Given, 2008). I was able to obtain overwhelming details about the QA system production processes, the nuances and subtleties of the QA system in action and the disjuncture's between values enshrined in QA standards and the actual realization in practice.

There are a variety of interviewing mode, from one-to-one individual interview to group or focus group interview (Cohen, et al. 2007, 2018), taking the form of face to face interchange, telephone or mediated by computer and internet (Brinkhmann, 2013). The challenge of bringing together senior official at NCHE, Ministry of Education and university managers (elite policy actors) and time pressed academics made group interviewing unattainable (Beitin, 2012). One-to-one individual interviews were conducted, and this was more appropriate for various reasons. It was relatively easy to arrange and control; flexible for participants; and more private and confidential, which helped to protect their confidentiality especially on sensitive issues (Descombe, 2010). It also gave more freedom to participants to avoid circumstances where others would keep silent when they consider their opinion to be contrary to the prevailing group norms (Brinkhmann, 2013). For instance, some participants literally alerted me that 'I am telling you this in confidence', implying they would not have shared their opinions in the presence of others.

5.3.3.2.1. Interviewing process

A total of 40 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted from July to December 2020, each lasting between 40 minutes and 3 hours. Herzog (2012) stressed the need to pay attention to time and location of interview beyond technical matters of convenience, arguing that these play a role in constructing reality and can affect quality of data. Initially, I had planned to have conventional face to face interviews, preferably in participants offices until the outbreak of Covid 19 epidemic, which coincided with my data collection period. It was difficult for both me and participants, because not only was physical face to face interview a challenge but online interview was also difficult due to poor internet infrastructure in Malawi. I

negotiated with each participant the date, time and mode of interview to ensure that decisions were made in light of ethical practice towards interviewees (Punch, 2009). About 8 participants chose online interview which were conducted through the 'Zoom Meeting Application'. For 29 participants, interviews were conducted in their office, one participant (Ministry of Education official) invited me to his residential house while another one to a Lodge/Hotel. I bought facemasks and bottles of hand sanitizers which I gave to participants who did not have them to prevent Covid-19 infections.

Interviews with participants begun with establishing a rapport by briefly explaining the purpose of the study, nature of interviews and ethical issues so that they can be open to my research questions (Punch & Oancea, 2014). This was followed by asking simple questions about interviewees professional background to lessen the tension between the researcher and the researched and provide context for substantive questions **(Appendix II)**. Kvale (1999) posited two metaphors for interviewing: the interviewer as a 'miner' or as a 'traveler'. The former, assumes participants possess specific information and the job of the researcher is to 'dig it out' while in the latter, the researcher construct knowledge with participants by wandering along with them. The 'traveler' metaphor informed the interviewing process in my study. The interviews were interactive and not merely an extractive exercise to promote dialectical dialogue as much as digging in line with the critical paradigm epistemology (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). I was active and reflective, probing the contradictions in participants construction of reality with regard to the QA debates in higher education and the disjuncture between oral discourse and written NCHE QA standards and frameworks (Brinkhmann & Kvale, 2015). Open-ended and non-leading questions were used during interviews to avoid the appearance of favoring a particular position or response and this allowed interviewees to express their ideas freely (Cohen, et al., 2018). I also used the technique of paraphrasing the questioning during interview to check for meaning and to clarify intentions of interviewee statements and ensure interpretive validity. All interviews, except for two, were recorded using the digital voice recorder with participants consent and later transcribed verbatim (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

Power asymmetry between the researcher and interviewee is a very significant issue in qualitative research interviews (Brinkhmann & Kvale, 2015), for "the interview is not simply a data collection situation but a social and frequently a political situation"(Cohen et al., 2011, p. 205). Brinkhmann & Kvale, (2015) noted that power relations cannot necessarily be

eliminated in research interviews. Rather, "the interviewer ought to reflect on the role of power in the production of interview knowledge" (p. 38). In my case, although interviewees at NCHE and MoEST, were 'elite' policy actors who occupied senior management positions, some of them were tenured senior academics staff in public universities but were only seconded to those agencies by government. This helped to reduce the impact of power relations since I am broadly a member of the higher education community. I was able to control the topics and course of interviews, although some participants exercised more power in defining the interview situation. I had very little control in negotiating where the interview should take place. One MoEST official demanded that I send the interview schedule and simply provided written responses and could not afford me the opportunity to probe for clarifications or in-depth information. Similarly, a head of department at one case study university declined to be recorded. I had difficulties taking down interview notes for one hour. Afterwards I had to immediately write fieldnotes, documenting insights that I had missed to produce a detailed narrative report. These isolated cases demonstrated how power relations could affect interviews and quality of data.

5.3.3.3. Document analysis

Document analysis was another source of data for the study. The analysis of documents or policy texts is an important part of policy study (Fairclough, 2013; Yorke & Vidovich, 2016) such that "documents are increasingly recognized as being insightful and rich data sources dispelling beliefs that they are dry and dull sources" (Barlow 2016, p. 378). Punch and Oancea (2014) stressed that historical and contemporary documents comprise a rich source of data for education and social research, which can provide important insights for triangulating findings against other sources such as interviews. The advantages of documentary evidence to this study included their broad coverage, stability over time, low-cost way to obtain empirical data (Bowen, 2009) and the "unobtrusive" nature (Yin 2014, p. 158), implying that although documents were not created as part of my study, the contents still represented social constructions (Fairclough, 2013). In fact, document analysis made it possible to draw in-depth insights about inaccessible key national policy actors (i.e., Minister of Education), global/international and African regional players to understand their activities, policy discourses/ideologies that shape their education policy thrusts and cartography of power and how they influenced the formal QA system in Malawi.

Silverman (2014) warned that documents must be selected and used carefully, while Bowen (2009) stressed that "researchers should look at documents with a critical eye and be cautious in using them " (p. 33), concurring with Yin (2014) that "they are not always precise, accurate or complete recordings of events and may not be lacking in bias" (p. 107). Scott, (1990) and Jupp (1996) posited four basic criteria for evaluating and selecting documents that I used in my study: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. I selected original and official documents that were representative of international, regional and national/local strategic drive towards QA reforms in higher education as illustrated in Table 6. The full document list is presented in **Appendix III**. At global/international and regional level, document of the World Bank, UNESCO, European Union, African Union and SADC to provide insights to global/international influence on the QA system reform. At national level, documents from Malawi Government Ministry of Education that provide policy direction for higher education; Malawi Parliament Hansards on deliberation of the NCHE Act of 2011; and NCHE QA standards frameworks and press releases from 2016-2022. At institutional level, documents from the case study sites to elucidate the contextual conditions that obtained in case universities. Documents from the international agencies, Malawi Government, Ministry of Education and a few from NCHE were readily available in the public domain and accessed online from their websites. But permission was sought to access most documents from NCHE, the Malawi Parliament and case study universities.

Table 6: Overview of Documentary sources of data for the study

Setting	Institution	Number of Documents
Global or International and Regional	The World Bank	9
	UNESCO	5
	European Union	9
	African Union	11
	SADC	6
National	Government of Malawi, Ministry of Education Science & Technology (MoEST)	14
	Malawi Parliament	2
	National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)	29
Institution/Local	CS1-PvtU Private University	11
	CS3 & CS3-PubU Public University Colleges	15

Barlow (2016) pointed out ethical dilemmas and potential harm of reading and viewing sensitive documents, lack of control over data and difficulties to negotiate access as some of the challenges of documentary evidence. For my study, accessing some documents proved to be a major problem. Among others, NCHE and the two public universities declined to grant me access to university's QA self-assessment reports, and NCHE accreditation assessment reports of universities, claiming that such documents were confidential. This somewhat affected my analysis of the influence of the QA system on practices within universities.

5.3.4. Data analysis techniques

Interview data for the study were analyzed using the technique of thematic analysis while qualitative content analysis was applied to documentary evidence. NViVo 12 computer software, which is a useful tool for conducting qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2012) was used to code the data during thematic analysis. The design of my study combined explanation, interpretive understanding and critique (Poutanen & Kovalainen, 2010). Data analysis required "integrating theory and empirical evidence, to interpret social meanings and evaluate actions" (Fischer, 2016, p. 95-96). What follows is a detailed account of how I conducted data analysis.

5.3.4.1. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis refers to "the process of analyzing data according to commonalities, relationships and differences across a data set; it aims to search for aggregated themes within the data"(Gibson and Brown, 2009, p. 128) which can be interpreted to answer research questions of the study (Attride-stirling, 2001). Thematic analysis can be applied to "a wide range of data forms including interviews, observations, visual and textual data" (Gibson and Brown, 2009, p. 131). Braun and Clarke (2006, p 4) pointed out the major advantage of thematic analysis that it is not bound to any "particular theoretical or epistemological position". And the fact that it "does not require detailed theoretical and technical knowledge makes it relatively easy to apply" (ibid, p24) which is appropriate to a beginning researcher. However, there are two fundamental limitations of thematic analysis. It "does not allow to make claims about language use or the fine-grained functionality of talk" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 28). Second, without "the use of existing theoretical frameworks to support analytical claims, the method tends to have limited interpretive power" (Ibid p. 27). The integration of theory and empirical evidence, within the study design addressed these limitations.

The common steps of qualitative data analysis begin with the coding technique, then combining codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparison in graphs, tables and charts (Attride-stirling, 2001; Creswell, 2007, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Thematic analysis broadly constituted; “the technique of coding and abstracting themes” (Attride-stirling, 2001, p. 390). To “code is to create a category which can be used to describe a general feature of data; a category that pertains to a range of data examples” (Gibson and Brown, 2009, p. 130). Boyatzis (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2012) indicated that thematic analysis can generate semantic (descriptive) themes, which do not require inferences beyond the explicit meaning of data, or latent (interpretive) themes through inferences to theories, abstract concepts and ideologies which shape what is articulated in the data. The distinction derives from two approaches to coding. Codes may be generated *a priori* or deductively from the theoretical framework, research questions and interview guides to serve analytical interest, or in a more inductive, bottom-up ‘grounded’ theory approach advocated by Glaser and Strauss, where coding is data-driven and provides rich descriptions (Attride-stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles et al., 2014) although practically, “no themes can be purely inductive, since the researcher always has theoretical ideas or knowledge that inevitably influence coding” (Joffe and Yardley, 2004, p. 58). Attride-stirling (2001) stressed that coding “can be done on the basis of theoretical interests guiding the research questions, on the basis of salient issues that arise in the data itself, or on the basis of both” (p. 390) supporting the view that qualitative analysis can be simultaneously deductive and inductive (Creswell, 2007, 2013). The researcher can examine data in terms of theory-driven sensitizing concepts and after or alongside this deductive phase of analysis, look at the data for undiscovered and emergent patterns through inductive analysis (Patton, 2002). My approach combined a *priori* (deductive) coding and data-driven (inducting) coding to enhance the rigor of thematic analysis (Fereday, Muir-Cochrane, & Muir-Cochreane, 2006). This enabled me to take a critical orientation to data analysis by “simultaneously giving voice to the experiences and meanings of participants and interrogating latent assumptions, ideologies and underlying ideas behind what they explicitly say” (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 2).

The preparatory phase for data analysis was organizing data into files and converting them to appropriate units. Organization of data is “critical in qualitative research and data analysis because of the large amount of information gathered during the study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 238). The digital voice recorded interviews data were transcribed verbatim to avoid missing some

important information. Physical documents were scanned or digitized and converted into electronic pdf files. All data files (transcripts and documents) were classified by data source code, uploaded in NViVo 12 computer software and organized in two folders: (1) interviews and (2) documents to facilitate analysis. A two-phased sequential approach was followed in the actual analysis of data. First was conducting within the case analysis. I coded and abstracted initial themes, beginning with the case of NCHE in which data obtained at national level and from international/regional players was analyzed, followed by each of the three case universities. The analytical process included finding out similarities and differences and defining categories and patterns reflecting the research questions. In the second phase I conducted the across-the case analysis in which common themes were abstracted across the four cases, while retaining the integrity of unique, contradictory and negative/discrepant explanations that emerged from each case. The across-the case analysis was used to interpret the higher education QA system development trajectory in Malawi.

Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012) framework, which I found to provide a simple, clear and usable approach for doing thematic analysis was followed in the practical steps of analyzing data among the various approaches I reviewed in literature (Attride-stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Braun & Clarke (2006, pp. 87-93) proposed that thematic analysis can be undertaken by following six practical steps: (1) familiarizing yourself with data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the research report. The analysis of data in this study was an iterative process that started with repeated reading of the dataset in its entirety to familiarize and immerse myself in details of the data, whilst 'memoing' ideas and concepts of analytical interest in my 'data analysis notebooks' and on margins of printed (hard) copies of interview transcripts and selected key documents (Creswell, 2012). I concurrently used NVIVO and printed transcripts to lessen the time spent on the computer following the ophthalmologist instruction due to my chronic problem of eyesight. Once I was familiar with the data, I begun the formal process of coding transcripts guided by the policy trajectory framework, research questions and interview guides and both along and after this deductive coding, novel and emergent salient issues in the data were coded and added where necessary. As Braun & Clarke (2012) suggested, initially whatever I identified to be relevant to the research questions I coded in both small and large chunks of data. Then, I conducted focused coding by going through the entire dataset but now focusing on each of the four contexts of the policy trajectory framework (i.e., linked to research questions) at a time, whilst incorporating new material and modifying

initial codes, until the emergence of regularities or data saturation where "no new information emerged with additional data analysis" (Mertens, 2010, p. 447).

The next major phase was generating or constructing themes that represent broad level patterned responses and meaning. Boyatzis (1998) defined theme as "a generalized pattern in the data that at the minimum describes and organizes the possible observation and at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (p.4). I reviewed the segments of data abstracted from the transcripts and classified under the codes, identified similarities and overlaps between the codes and extracted broad topics or issues around which the codes clustered. I then generated or constructed themes by collapsing or clustering codes that shared unifying features together so that they reflect and describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data according to research questions. The generated themes were revised noting the relationship between themes and the collated extract of data that could not properly explain the themes were removed, while some codes were relocated to other themes; and some themes reduced to sub-themes (or sub-components of themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The final themes and sub-themes (i.e. **Appendix IV)** were further refined so that they are "specific enough to be discrete (non-repetitive) and broad enough to encapsulate a set of ideas contained in numerous text segments" but also work together as a whole (Attride-stirling, 2001, p.392).

5.3.4.2. Content analysis

Document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents like other analytic methods in qualitative research requires that data be examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse data from documents in this study. Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use" (p. 18). Descombe (2010) and Krippendorff (2004) further stated that content analysis technique originally derived from communication and media research and has been historically used for quantifying the contents of texts. Put simply, the researcher samples texts; defines the unit of analysis (e.g. words, sentences, paragraphs) and categories to be use for analysis; code the texts into the categories, then uses frequency counts of codes and categories to provide the overall picture of the texts being examined leading to interpretation of results (Descombe, 2010; Cohen et al., 2011). Qualitative content analysis eschews the quantification element typical of conventional content analysis for dislocating texts and their meaning from its contexts (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2014;

Punch & Oancea, 2014). It views texts as "representations that are created to be seen, read, interpreted and acted on for their meaning and therefore requires analyzing texts in the context they are produced and used" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. viii).

Krippendorff (2004, p. 20-25) outlined epistemological consideration for content analysis to offer some protocol for exploring textual data, which guided my study. First, "texts do not have single meanings and can sustain multiple readings. There is no meaning waiting to be discovered, identified and described" (p. 22). Second, "texts have meanings related to particular contexts, discourses and purposes". Content analysis requires providing the context within which the selected texts are examined to serve as the conceptual justification for reasonable interpretation (p.24). Third, "the meanings of texts (content) speak to something other than the given texts". Content analysis "must then look outside the physical texts, for example to how people use the texts, what the texts tell them, and the conceptions and outcomes that the texts encourage" (p. 23) as well as going beyond the "manifest content of texts" to "reading between the lines" to offer in-depth interpretation of meanings evoked by the texts (p.20). Forth, content analysis is at its most successful when it breaks down linguistically constituted social facts or realities (i.e., attributions, public behavior, social relationships and institutional realities) by attending to the language of texts being analyzed and the context in which it was produced (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 75-77). Fifth, Bowen (2009) posited that when document analysis is used in combination with other research methods, for example interviews, pre-determined codes used in thematic analysis of interview transcripts maybe applied in content analysis of documents and vice versa "to generate themes/categories that serve to integrate data gathered by different methods" (p.32).

My practical approach to content analysis was guided by a framework (Figure 3) designed for the study by adapting Bowen (2009) three step strategy for qualitative content analysis of documents: "skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination) and interpretation" (p.32) and ideas from Krippendorff (2004) expansive conceptual framework for content analysis. The latter in brief, emphasizes examining the '*body of texts'* using *'analytical constructs'* that operationalizes the '*contexts*' in which texts are made sense of and interpreting data through narratives supported by validating evidence to make *'inferences'* that answer research questions (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 29-43).

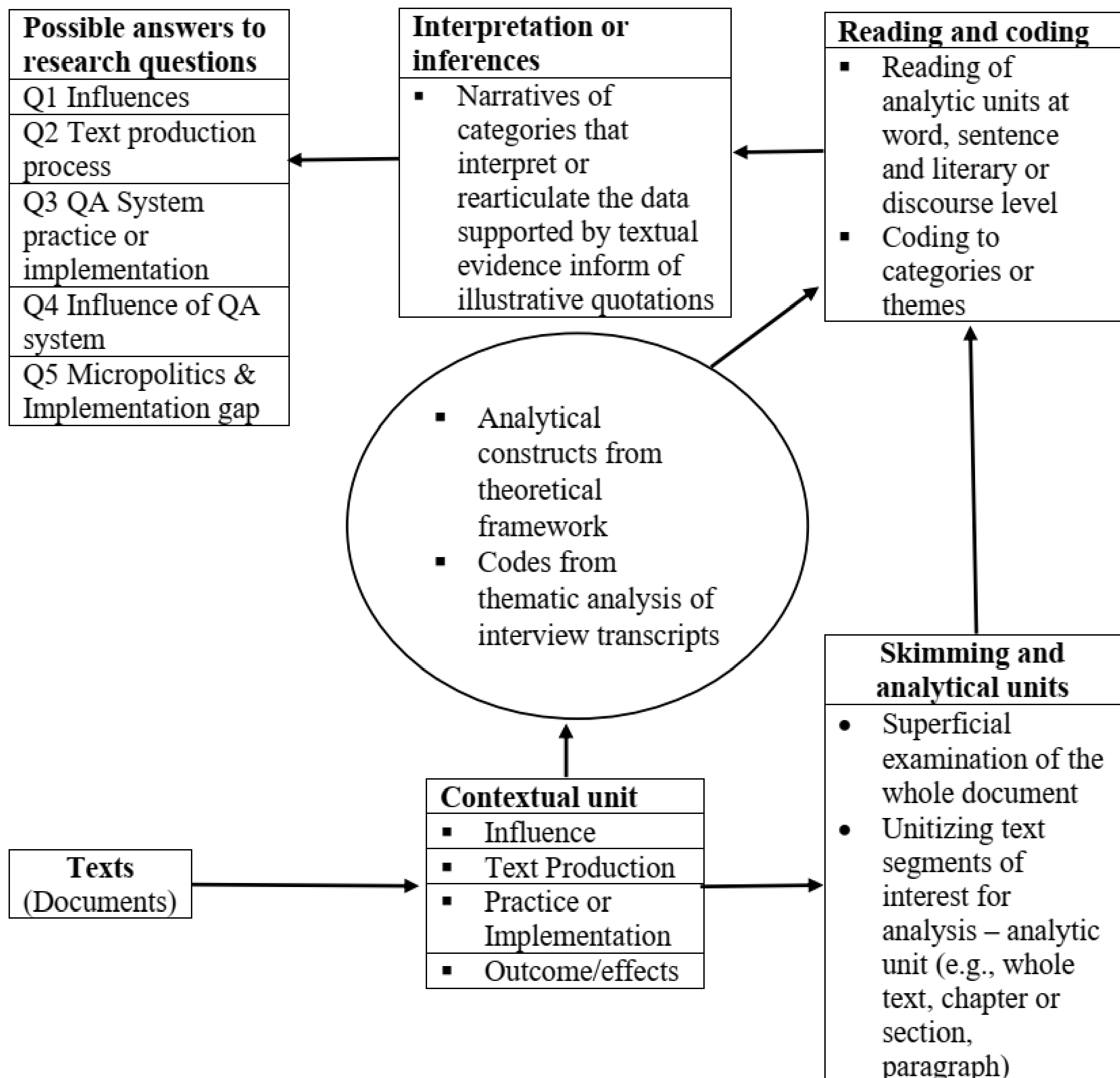

Figure 3: Content analysis framework adapted from Bowen (2009) and Krippendorff (2004)

The sampled texts were initially examined by reading the whole document focusing on the general or main ideas advanced, linguistic properties (i.e., overall structure, narratives, grammatical mood) and how each text reflected the four 'contexts' of the policy trajectory framework. This enabled me to identify the text segment of interest for intensive examination (unit of analysis), which in some cases were the whole document, but in most cases a chapter/section or paragraph. The next step was intensive reading of the units of analysis at word, phrases, sentence and paragraph level and 'between the lines' and coding data into categories or organizing themes guided by research questions and concepts from the theoretical framework. Then, I wrote narrative summaries of categories/themes from each text that

interpreted or re-articulated the data, supported by textual evidence in form of illustrative quotations. Throughout the process, I scrutinized and constantly compared codes and categories/themes across the interview and documentary evidence noting similarities, differences and general patterns (Bowen, 2009). By doing so, I filled in underdeveloped themes/categories to ensure that the evidence from documents and interviews provided a complete picture of how the national QA system for higher education in Malawi was conceived, developed, operated and influenced practices within universities.

5.4. Ethical issues

This education policy research study was undertaken within the ethical guidelines and procedures of the British Education Research Association, BERA (2018) and those adopted by the University of Bristol, School of Education Research Ethics Committee (REF:100225) and the National Committee on Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH), of the National Commission for Science and Technology (NCST) in Malawi (REF No. P.04/20/478). Approval for the study was granted by the latter two committees after the research satisfactorily met all their ethical concerns **(Appendix V).** The main ethical issues most applicable and relevant to my study concerned: protection of participants from Covid 19, access to study setting, informed consent, and privacy and confidentiality (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

5.4.1. Protection of participants from COVID-19 infection

The outbreak of Covid 19 epidemic coincided with my data collection period. It was therefore imperative to protect the life of participants and my own by preventing Covid 19 infections. Upon arrival for field work in Malawi from the University of Bristol in United Kingdom on 31st March 2020, I strictly adhered to COVID-19 prevention protocol put in place by the government of Malawi. I was on 14 days monitored quarantine for COVID-19 symptom development by the Ministry of Health. I was visited and assessed by the Ministry of Health, Lilongwe District Health Office rapid response team on 1st, 7th, 9th and 14th April 2020. On all occasions I was found negative and discharged on 15th April 2020 to continue with my normal duties as indicated in certification of discharge in **Appendix VI**. I strictly followed the Malawi government COVID-19 protocol during interviews including not shaking hands with participants, sitting two metres apart, wearing masks and washing hands with soap or using hand sanitiser. I also bought facemasks and bottles of hand sanitizers which I gave to participants before interviews to prevent Covid-19 infections. The major impact of COVID 19 was that some policy actors decline to participate in the study.

5.4.2. Gaining access to sites

Negotiating entry to the research site constituted an initial critical research activity as this can seriously affect all phases of research including the quality of data (Punch, 2009; Cohen et al., 2018). I anticipated access to NCHE and one case study university site not to be problematic. In the former, official inquiry was already made while I am an official on study leave from the latter case institution. However, for the rest of sites, the situation was different. The official permission was sought from senior administrators 'gate keepers' of all the institutions involved in this study in Malawi. Formal letters accompanied by ethics approval letters from University of Bristol and Malawi ethics boards were physically delivered to them, containing precise details about the study including the interviews I planned to conduct, the main thematic areas to be covered and the timeframe, as well as permission to access relevant official documents. In response, formal written permission was granted by all the institutions **(Appendix VII).**

5.4.3. Informed consent

After gaining initial access to site, an invitation letter was sent to appropriate individuals requesting their participation in the study. Cohen et al. (2011) stated that informed consent must include four elements: "competence, voluntarism, full information, and comprehension" (p. 78). This implies that mature and responsible individuals can make correct decisions if given all the relevant information; the participants are free to choose to participate in the research being aware of the potential risks; the consent is fully informed; and they have full understanding of the nature of the study (ibid). Participants should be clearly informed about the process they are to be engaged, how it will be used, how and to whom it will be reported, and why their participation is necessary (British Education Research Association [BERA], 2018). The invitation letter sent to participants contained details about the purpose of the study and procedures to be used, expected benefits, the voluntary nature of consent, the right to withdraw at any time, and complaint procedures if they felt they needed to complain about my study or conduct. Participants who accepted to participate were requested to sign the consent form **(Appendix VIII).** A few refused to sign the consent form because they felt it was not necessary and their choice was respected. A meaningful dialogue around closure was made at each study site and with each participant at the end of data collection to maintain rapport and trust. This proved helpful to get feedback from participants on the interview transcripts that were sent to them for verification (Morrison, 2012).

5.4.4. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

The right to control disclosure of what policy actors who volunteered to participate in the study deemed personal or non-public information about themselves (privacy) was respected (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The identify of participants and their institutions was replaced by identification codes to guarantee their confidentiality and anonymity. However, due to the particularities of the three case universities in this study, it was possible that they could still be identified, especially by people from within the case boundary or by other educationist or researchers. Thus, some sensitive information was not reported in this study. The recording, storage and use of research data collected by the study complied with the UK' current Data Protection Act effected on 25th May of 2018, together with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The data was throughout the study kept confidential, stored securely, and only used for the purposes of the study. After the recommended period for storing the data is over, all the recordings and transcripts would be securely disposed of, following guidelines provided for by the University of Bristol.

5.5. Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness denotes the key criterion or principle of good qualitative research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). A unique feature of qualitative inquiry is that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis(Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). The role of the researcher becomes a critical consideration due to potential biased stance of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The researchers need to give consideration to subjective disclosure, which may give them voice to allow the reader better understand the true face of the researcher and results of the study (Davey & Liefooghe, 2004). I now provide an account of my positionality; critical reflexivity; specificity and credibility of the study.

5.5.1. Positionality

I am an academic member of staff at one of the case study public universities with academic and professional expertise in educational policy, planning and leadership. I have served as deputy head of department and member of the Academic Planning Course Committee (APCC) of the oldest public university senate, where I was involved in reviewing academic programmes developed by the university. Thus, the interpretation of data was also informed by my experiences as an academic. I took on both the insider and outsider roles of the researcher depending on the type of institution and participants involved (Mercer, 2007). Insider research can be both advantageous and problematic (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). There are issues of

objectivity, impartiality and bias linked to working in familiar settings (Mercer, 2007). However, interrogation of my own subjective positioning was pursued through reflexivity to ensure transparency in interpretation of the QA system reform (Taylor et al., 2016).

5.5.2. Reflexivity

Critical paradigm emphasises the need for reflexivity as the 'objective' standard for integrity of the research process (Mivchael Crotty, 1998). Ongoing "critical reflexivity" formed the main criteria for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study (Mertens, 2015, p. 273). This among others involved constantly assessing the relationship between "knowledge" and "the ways of doing knowledge" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 5). Ball (2017) and Rizvi & Lingard (2010) used the metaphor of pragmatic toolbox to stress that methodologies do not determine the approach to critical policy research but should be framed in terms of the research purpose and positionality of the researcher. For example, while the study was undertaken within the borders of Malawi, my approach was situated within the growing research corpus that problematizes the traditional understanding of nation-state bound territorialism and the dichotomy of an abstract global and concrete local (Ball, et al., 2017; Kauko, et al., 2018). By globalizing the policy trajectory framework and embedding network theory within the case study strategy, the study transcended both the conceptual global -local dichotomies and 'methodological nationalism', (Ball, 2017) to account for global, regional, national and local dynamics and provide a comprehensive understanding of QA system reform in Malawi (Antoni Verger, et al., 2018). Similarly, Alvesson & Skoldberg (2000) described critical reflexivity in the context of empirical research as "the interpretation of interpretations", arguing that it is sometimes difficult for the researcher to critically examine taken for granted assumptions and blind spots in their social culture without drawing on theoretical concepts to reflect the processes in which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written" (p. 5). I provided theoretical concepts that facilitated interpretation of the empirical material at the outset using the modified policy trajectory framework (Kauko et al., 2018).

5.5.3. Specificity

Unlike the conventional concept of "reliability" which emphasizes replicability and objectivity, Descombe (2010) indicated that a "fairly detailed description and interpretation of research decisions was more appropriate for qualitative research" (Tao, 2013, p. 115). The method of 'audit trail' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 278) was adopted to help readers "follow the path and key decisions taken by the researcher" (Descombe, 2010,

p. 300). Mertens (2015, p. 272) referred to ‘confirmability audit trail’, in emphasizing that adequate trail should be left to enable readers determine if the interpretations and conclusions can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry. The principle behind constructing the audit trail is that: first, it forces the researcher to provide detailed record of the research processes and make it more self-critical and systematic; second, it can allow the reader to be in apposition to evaluate research procedures and trustworthiness of the study (Descombe, 2010; Tao, 2013). I provided a detailed record of the research design, including research questions, theoretical and analytical framework, case study methodology, and data collection and analysis methods, implying readers can trace and evaluate the research process.

5.5.4. Credibility

Credibility refers “to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Attempts were made to ensure credibility by following procedures of member checks, triangulation, and multivocality (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Tracy, 2010). To begin with, although some documents were in the public domain and freely available on institutional websites, implying permission for analysis of documents was implied, care was taken during data analysis not to misrepresent the words or changing the overall core idea of documents, by simply extracting excerpts to convey whatever idea that might come to my mind as a researcher (Nabaho, Turyasingura, Kiiza, Andama, & Beinebyabo, 2020). The process strived for both objectivity and sensitivity and maintaining the balance between the two (Bowen, 2009). Babbie & Mouton, (2001) suggested member checks by going back to participants to check both the data and interpretation. For my study, after transcribing interviews, transcripts were sent to participants to check whether what had been constructed reflected what they had said, and data analysis proceeded only after their confirmation. Further, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used in combination as a means of triangulation to corroborate findings across data sets and provide a comprehensive understanding by reducing the potential bias that can exist in a single method study(Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Triangulation is considered one of the best ways of enhancing credibility in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) by providing a “confluence of evidence that breeds credibility”(Bowen, 2009, p.28). Above all, the fundamental premise of my study was that QA in higher education is both a technical and political process shaped by competing values and power relations. Thus, I drew on perspectives of different policy actors. ‘Multivocality’ characterized interpretation of data in which different construction of reality, underlying values, tensions and conflicts were explicated (Tracy 2010, p. 844). There was total

and explicit inclusion of competing viewpoints, which is fundamental in critical/transformative research where there is an attempt to elevate the oppressed voices and forge an agenda for change (Mertens, 2015).

5.6. Conclusion

Based on the qualitative research tradition, framed by the critical philosophical paradigm, which combines explanation, interpretive understanding and critique to examine the political dimension of social phenomena beyond technical- rational assumptions, the study examined how the national QA system for higher education in Malawi regulated by the NCHE was conceived; developed; operated; and the influence it was having in the higher education sector. This was explored using the case study methodology. The NCHE which was inextricably linked to the national QA system for higher education formed the primary case study and principal focus of the entire investigation. Three HEIs: one private and two public, formed secondary case studies to provide 'views from below' about the QA system development processes and maximize what could be learnt about the QA system implementation and its outcomes within universities. A modified policy trajectory framework that accounts for multi-scalar (local, national, regional and global) dimensions of higher education QA system reforms and the dynamic two-way interaction of structure and agency, provided the analytical framework for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. The empirical material was drawn from a combination of semi-structured interviews with various policy actors and document analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the QA system reform. In total 40 interviews were conducted, and a large range of documents were analyzed. Meanwhile, ongoing reflexivity ensured the objectivity and integrity of the research process, while recognizing the limitations of the study.

Chapter Six

'Inside' the context of influence: Quality assurance system agenda for higher education in Malawi

6.0. Introduction

This chapter presents results for research question one: What external (global) and internal (national) factors influenced the need for the formal QA system for higher education to be identified, justified and placed onto the government policy agenda? The results constitute the 'context of influence' in the policy trajectory framework, whose key analytic was the historical antecedent and pressure that led to the gestation of the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi. For analytical purposes, results were analysed in two dimensions (Table 7): (1) 'Global' reflecting supranational and transnational influences and (2) national/local influences. The chapter is organized into three major sections. The first section discusses the global context of influence. The section covers the national/local context of influence. The final section provides a synthesis of the framing of the quality issue and its placement onto the government policy decision agenda.

Table 7: Context of influence themes at global and national level

	Dimension	Themes
Context of Influence	Global/International	• Learning from international QA initiatives and experiences from other countries • Regionalization & Harmonization of HE Systems • International Organizations (IOs) • Internationalization of Higher Education
	National/Local	• Growth of private universities • Expansion of HE amidst declining funding • Relevance and Employability, • Demands for New-Managerialism, • Governance Reform of the HE system, • Changing Role of the State in QA.

6.1. Global context of influence

As indicated in chapter three, several factors which operate at the global level tend to influence QA reforms in many countries. Four major themes relating to the global context were identified to have influenced the QA system reform in Malawi, namely: learning from international QA initiatives and experiences from other countries; regionalization and harmonization of higher education systems; international organizations (IOs); and internationalization of higher education.

6.1.1. Learning from international QA initiatives and experiences from other countries

Global influence was primarily seen by respondents in terms of learning from international QA initiatives and experiences from other countries, which they indicated contributed to the quest for the QA system for higher education in Malawi. This was consistent with the narrative in NCHE documents that all over the world, there was increasing interest in higher education quality and standards reflecting the role of higher education in the global knowledge economy. Malawi to achieve its aspiration to be a dynamic and knowledge-based economy as reflected in the Malawi growth and development strategy needed to put in place the means of assuring and demonstrating quality (NCHE, 2013). The discourse of knowledge economy was used by national policy makers to shape the domestic policy agenda and legitimate the QA system reform. The QA standards and frameworks developed at international, African continental and regional level were cited as examples of such influences on the development of the QA system in Malawi (NCHE 01). One key informant (henceforth KI) at Ministry of Education elaborated as follows:

> "Global influence was there. The influence has been at different level. There is international, there is African continental and there is regional. At all these levels, they have developed quality assurance standards. As you know we are in a global world, so it was felt we do not need to be left behind in the global thinking" (MOEST, 03).

Some respondents claimed that most of the international QA systems, processes and procedures have emerged as a result of the European Bologna process. There was a point for Malawi "to learn about these international experiences in a way they were helping to develop national systems" (NCHE 3). The influence of the European Bologna process was mainly through its norm-setting QA instruments, which served as some of the blueprints in the development of QA in Malawi. This was perhaps not surprising considering that the higher education system in Malawi like in many African countries was heavily shaped by European systems whose influence still persist through educational links and enduring bonds between national governments and former European colonial powers (Okeke, 2014). Besides, the impact of the Bologna Process has been documented by scholars, particularly, how it has triggered similar reforms in other world regions (Corsier & Parveva, 2013).

For seven respondents, learning from experiences in other African countries, mostly neighbouring countries in Southern Africa, significantly impacted the establishment of the national QA agency and regulatory system. One official at NCHE asserted that the coming of

the NCHE in Malawi was in part a response to regional trends. This was because within the Southern African region and throughout Africa, it was more like a window of change where countries and governments were setting up national bodies like NCHE to regulate the higher education sector. Although he could not directly pinpoint that Malawi had to do it because of this, he concluded that the fact that this was happening in the 2000's, it was in a way informed by regional trends (NCHE 06). Zavale, Santos, & Da Conceição Dias (2016) noted the trend in Africa that most QA agencies were established after 1990s. By 2012, about 21 African countries had established QA agencies and several other countries were in advanced stages of establishing them. Two KIs at Ministry of Education confirmed that with the liberalization of higher education, they "began to learn from other countries that they have a national statutory body, which is mandated by government through parliament that can close an institution if it is not meeting the standards. It was felt this institution was quite critical for preserving quality" (MOEST 03). One KI at Ministry Education explained some reference points of Malawi:

> "After 1994 there was a liberalization of higher education. But the question was how do we maintain quality in this case? It is when people said, what is done elsewhere? In Zimbabwe they have ZIMCHE, Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education. In Kenya and Tanzania, the same. Can't we have our own institution? It is when NCHE was established in 2011" (MOEST 01).

Some respondents further underscored the role of international and regional networks of QA organizations. "There are international, African, and regional networks of QA in higher education and Malawi has been impacted by all these networks" (NCHE 01). The specific network that was mostly highlighted was the International Network of QA Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The main role played by these networks of QA organizations in the context of Malawi was identified as "benchmarking" (NCHE 03). The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Malawi was benchmarked on the INQAAHE 'Guidelines of Good Practice (GGP) for external QA agencies'. This demonstrated that without necessarily any official subscribed membership, national policy makers in Malawi took cognizance of the existence of global QA networks and translated the principles and models they champion to shape the nation QA agency and regulatory system. It also supported the policy science scholarship on the central role of ideas (policy learning) and discursive processes in policy development (Béland, 2009).

6.1.2. Regionalization and harmonization of higher education systems

The QA system reform for Malawi was further heavily influenced by regional dictates. These emanated from the African continental and Southern Africa regional efforts towards

harmonisation of higher education systems, driven by regionalization initiatives of the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The narrative in Malawi National Education Sector Plans was that Malawi is a member of African Union (AU) and SADC and is committed to implementation of African regional policies. The documents comprehensively articulated how the African Union and SADC policy frameworks are operationalized in national policy and strategies for education in Malawi (MoEST, 2008, 2020).

The African Union (AU) views regionalization as a key and intermediate step towards integration of African countries into the global economy. The vision of building an integrated Africa embodies the harmonized higher education system, which was epitomised in the *Second Decade of Education for Africa* (2006-2015) plan of action by AU member states and forms the strategic objective of the *Continental Education Strategy for Africa* (2016-2025) (African Union, 2016). The policy framework, '*The African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy'* adopted by the African Union in 2007, provide the general direction for improving capacity and quality in higher education at the continental level (African Union, 2008). This envisions an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS) along the lines of the European Higher Education Area (AHEA) of the Bologna Process. The Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF) endorsed by the African Union in 2016, constitute the operational framework, which aims to facilitate the creation of a harmonized QA regime and procedures for the harmonized higher education system. This comprises several key instruments (and corresponding initiatives), some of which have already been developed and are being adapted by countries and others which still need to be developed. These include the:

- Addis Convention for Recognition of qualification – (*developed)*.
- African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) –(*developed)*
- African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) –(*developed)*
- African Credit Accumulation and Transfer System – (*being developed)*
- African Continental Qualification Framework – (*not yet developed)*
- African Continental Register for Quality Assurance Agencies and Quality Assured higher Education Institutions – (*not yet developed)*
- Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency- (*not yet developed)*.

The Addis Convention of 2014, originally the Arusha Convention (1981), which was amended in 2002 in Cape Town, South Africa and in Dakar, Senegal in 2003 and comprehensively revised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2014, is one fundamental instrument. The convention supports the mutual recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas, degrees and other academic qualifications in higher education in African countries. Underlying this is the principle of

harmonization and portability of qualifications on the continent that requires establishment and standardisation of QA and accreditation mechanisms at regional and national level. The Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) programme funded by the European Union in partnership with the African Union is another initiative. The African Standards and Guidelines for QA in Higher Education (ASG-QA) developed under the HAQAA initiative (2015-2018) provide the baseline for the development of QA systems in Africa. The African Union (AU) in collaboration with the Association of African Universities (AAU) developed the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) as a tool for assessing quality of higher education institutions in Africa against common set of quality standards and criteria in 2007. Therefore, harmonization of African higher education is anticipated to establish compatible structures and systems for enhancing the quality of higher education and facilitate academic and labour mobility by fostering equivalency and comparability of qualification and transferability of credits across countries.

One KI at the Ministry of Education noted that with globalization, Malawi cannot work in isolation. From the global aspect, there is African Union and SADC, which talk much about quality. In which case without directly pointing to a specific initiative, there has been an implicit influence on government decisions about QA in the context of Malawi's membership and signatory to regional treaties (MOEST 01). Three respondents took cognizance of the QA initiatives at African continental level. They observed that Malawi and many countries in Africa have not yet ratified the Addis Convention. However, they were particularly convinced that the QA movement was linked to the continental harmonization initiatives. This point was elaborated by one official at NCHE:

> At African Union level there are those initiatives to harmonize quality assurance processes. In fact, now there are African Standards and guidelines for higher education. They are also starting to develop the continental qualifications framework and even to set up a continental quality assurance agency to oversee the operations of quality assurance around Africa. In any way, if a country does not have a body for quality assurance, that country would be compelled to set up one to participate effectively (NCHE 02).

For three respondents, QA frameworks at African continental level had been instrumental in the development of QA procedures for the Malawian QA system. Malawi developed the *Higher Education QA System Framework* (HEQASF). This is an overarching framework which provides a blueprint for enhancing both external and internal QA. The framework adapted the African Standards and Guidelines for QA. The design of the Malawi Accreditation and

Evaluation Framework drew on the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM). This point was well articulated by one official at NCHE:

> Our accreditation standards have adapted the African rating mechanism. You can see this was developed for the whole continent by African Union with support from the Association of African Universities. I think there was a project which developed that African rating mechanism for higher education institutions. As NCHE, we have just adapted them. So, we can comfortably say, our standards are equivalent with other African countries (NCHE 03).

At the regional level, Malawi is a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a body established in 1992, consisting of 15 members States of Southern Africa. SADC broadly aims to achieve social-economic and political co-operation and regional integration. The SADC *Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan* (RISDP 2005-2010) stated "the main goal of SADC's integration agenda in the human resources development field was to increase the availability of educated and highly skilled personnel through equivalent and harmonized education and training systems of Member States" (SADC, 2005, p. 40).

Five respondents asserted that a great deal of the QA system reform in Malawi appeared to be driven by the SADC Protocol on Education and Training to which Malawi is a signatory. One KI at Ministry of Education clarified that this was because the SADC Protocol on Education and Training advocates for the development of formal systems for assuring quality of higher education; standardisation of higher education programmes and curricula; and articulation of qualifications and cross-transfer of credits in order to facilitate student and labour mobility within the region (MOEST 02). The influence of the SADC Protocol was viewed by some respondents in terms of its drive towards harmonization of standards and QA systems. This is what would have triggered the government of Malawi to establish NCHE according to another official at NCHE:

> "There is that Protocol on education and Training at SADC level, to which Malawi is a signatory. But if you are going to talk about protocols then it is mainly the harmonization processes of standards and quality assurance systems. That is what would have triggered the government" (NCHE 02).

This view was shared by another respondent from the National Technical Committee that drafted the NCHE Bill, who explained that at SADC level, there is a Committee on Certification and Accreditation, which developed the SADC regional qualifications framework. Every country in the SADC region was expected to develop a national qualifications framework and align it to the SADC one. The creation of regulatory bodies like

NCHE in Malawi was considered necessary for the adoption of the SADC Qualifications Framework, which depend on the extent of development of formal QA systems in each Member State (NTWG 01-Dean).

The above sentiments were supported by documentary evidence, which underscored three major initiatives linked to SADC regional efforts at harmonizing and integrating higher education systems. The SADC Protocol on Education and Training signed by Member States in 1997 in Blantyre, Malawi is one key instrument meant to achieve the harmonization of the system. Articles seven and eight of this protocol deals with co-operation in higher education and training and clarifies the key areas of harmonization. The main goal of the protocol is "to progressively achieve equivalence, harmonization and eventual standardization of the education and training systems in the region" (SADC, 1997). The SADC Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA) was enacted in 1997, with a specific mandate to develop and recommend policy guidelines, instruments, structures and procedures that would eventually facilitate equating, harmonizing, and standardization of accreditation and certification of qualifications in the SADC region. The SADC TCCA started developing the Regional Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) in 2001. This was finalized and adopted by the SADC Ministers of Education in 2011. Member State's agreed to align their qualifications frameworks and QA systems to the SADCQF. The Southern Africa Regional University Association (SARUA) comprising Vice Chancellors was launched in 2004 by SADC Ministers of Education as a think tank in higher education policy of the SADC region. Based on the 2006 to 2008 regional baseline studies in higher education: *"Towards a Common Future: Higher Education in the SADC Region, Research Findings from Four SARUA Studies"* (Kotecha, 2008), SARUA recommended to SADC Ministers of Education that all SADC higher education systems should reflect a trend towards the creation of statutory bodies to regulate higher education and quality. SARUA highlighted that five countries (Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Malawi) did not yet have national QA systems in place. This gave an impetus and further recommendation for establishment of national QA systems in Member States.

It was evident that the African Union and SADC are the key drivers in regionalization of higher education and harmonization of QA systems at the continental and Southern Africa regional level. While the African Union and SADC did not have the direct role, the evidence underscored the power of the two entities in influencing the agendas for national policy debates and content of QA system reforms through the formation of continental and regional QA

structures and frameworks with which all Members countries must comply. With Malawi's membership and signatory to regional treaties, this impacted the QA agenda and development of the QA system, although the most significant influence had been at sub-regional including the fifteen Southern African states forming the SADC than across the wider African continent.

6.1.3. International organizations (IOs)

Malawi depends heavily on the international community for technical and financial assistance, both as bilateral grant aid and through loan projects. The World Bank and UNESCO had been instrumental in providing technical and financial assistance for the QA system reform in higher education in Malawi. It is customary for the Malawi government to engage the World Bank to review the education sector and make recommendations for direction of policy and reforms and further development. These studies play an important role in strengthening reform agendas, and in evidence-based policy and planning, which is considered a rational approach to national policy and planning decisions. Besides, they are used as a key referent in lending decisions by the World Bank and other providers of international development assistance.

Although this was not mentioned by most respondents, except for one key informant (KI) at Ministry of Education, two sector review reports by the World Bank appeared to have strengthened the QA reform agenda in Malawi. The first sector report titled: "*The Education System in Malawi*" published in 2010 outlined specific policy elements that the government should endorse. It encouraged, private sector involvement; cost-sharing through user fees; student-loan system; governance structures for public universities that increases accountability; and expediting the enactment of the Higher Education Act and establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). The other sector report titled, "*Improving Higher Education in Malawi for Competitiveness in the Global Economy*" published in 2016, outlined several recommendations to inform policy, strategy decisions and ongoing reforms, including the development of the higher education quality assurance and accreditation system framework and the higher education qualifications framework. There is evidence that with the transition to a 'Knowledge Bank' (World Bank, 1998), the World Bank increasingly uses benchmarking comparative studies and national baseline analysis as policy tools to influence national governments into adopting particular reform packages (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; World Bank, 2011). The sector reports and recommendations for specific QA system reforms for Malawi, undertaken by the World Bank, point to the influence of the Bank offering policy 'solutions'.

The World Bank further provided technical and financial support towards infrastructural and QA system development. Seven respondents including, one KI at Ministry of Education, five at NCHE and one from the Civil Society indicated that the government of Malawi has been implementing the World Bank supported, *Skills Development Project* (SDP) coordinated by the NCHE since 2013. The project objectives included the:

> "sustainable increase of access to higher education, relevance of higher education to the labour market, improved governance and management systems and increased accountability for and respect for institutional autonomy" (NCHE, 2015, p. 3).

Through this project, the government purchased office premises for the newly established National QA Agency for Malawi – the NCHE. This was revealed by one KI at NCHE, who testified that "even this office structure was funded by the World Bank Skills Development Project" (NCHE 03). The World Bank also sponsored 'policy learning' trips for the Ministry of Education and newly established National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) staff to countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, and South Africa, which had been identified to have functional QA Agencies. The stated aim of these trips was for them to learn about formal QA systems and later develop QA and Accreditation standards and other instruments for the QA system in Malawi. One former Chairperson of NCHE elaborated:

> We had a study tour to Tanzania and Kenya. We learnt an awful lot about the equivalence to NCHE, the Commission of University Education (CUE). I think that is what it is called. We learnt a good deal from that study tour. There was World Bank funding. It was part of the Skills Development Project. That is where we got the funding for the study tour (NCHE 05)

The above views were supported by four other officials at NCHE, who indicated that when the NCHE begun to operate, most of the agency (NCHE) staff did not have formal training in QA. They had to visit QA agencies in other counties within the SADC region to learn how the QA agency operate. It was only after such policy learning that they started developing QA frameworks. The World Bank under the same project supported the development of QA instruments for the national QA system. This was explained by one KI at NCHE:

> The higher education qualifications framework was supported by the World Bank through the Skills Development Project (SDP). We also had the Open and Distance E-Learning (ODeL) framework which was developed under the SDP. We had to develop the higher education quality assurance system framework. This one too was supported by the World Bank under the SDP project (NCHE 06).

These sentiments were confirmed by three other KIs at NCHE who stressed that the World Bank hired international consultants, one from Germany, Harald Schomburg who facilitated

the development of the national graduate tracer study instruments and another one, from Mauritius, Kaylasha Allgoo developed the higher education qualification framework (HEQF); and the higher education quality assurance system (HEQAS).

UNESCO's role was linked to capacity building trainings. It was noted that within its broader mandate to provide technical support to member states, UNESCO through its International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) undertakes international research studies on external QA to identify 'best practices'. Based on these studies, UNESCO/IIEP develops and offers capacity building trainings to support national policy makers to design QA systems. Policy makers in Malawi have been beneficiaries of such trainings. Particularly, UNESCO/IIEP offered a three month-long distance education course, *'External Quality Assurance: Options for Higher Education Managers for Anglophone African Countries*' from 25 September to 22nd December 2006. Table 8 provides a description of the structure of the course to demonstrate how impactful it might have been on policy makers from Malawi.

Table 8: Structure of UNESCO/IIEP 2006 distance education course on EQA

Module	Focus
1. Making basic choices for external quality assurance systems	Basic concepts related to quality assurance processes, and organizational and methodological choices when designing the external quality assurance system.
2. Conducting the process of external quality assurance	Organization of external quality assurance processes based on International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Guideline of Good Practices
3. Setting up and developing the Quality Assurance Agency	Different options (i.e. affiliation, functions, structure, credibility and accountability of the agency) when establishing, managing, organizing and controlling the national quality assurance agency and its functions
4. Understanding and Assessing Quality	Basic concepts and different methods used in the assessment of quality
5. Regulating and assuring quality of cross-border higher education	Approaches and instruments for designing regulatory and quality assurance systems based on the UNESCO/OECD guidelines on cross-border higher education

The aim of this course was to help national policy makers to set up national QA systems for higher education and/or develop existing systems (Michaela Martin, Pereyra, Singh, & Stella, 2007). Six policy makers from Malawi, mainly five senior officials (Directors) in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and the Executive Secretary for Malawi National Commission for UNESCO attended this training. Based on participant's evaluation report of the training, the six policy makers from Malawi evaluated the course positively and made a

commitment that "the Ministry of Education would establish the Council for Higher Education" to address challenges they had identified including:

> "the absence of a unifying body such as the Council for Higher Education; Lack of quality audits for higher education institutions; lack of a unified legal framework to direct and control the establishment, registration, and performance of public and private universities; and lack of capacity to determine the needs for demand-driven courses and programmes" (Martin et al., 2007, p. 16).

UNESCO further supported senior officials at the Ministry of Education Science and Technology and the newly established NCHE to attend international conferences on QA. One KI at NCHE explained that the NCHE had some members of staff attending international conferences in Zambia, Cameroon, and Ghana. It also had an attachment of two members of staff to Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education both supported by UNESCO (NCHE 03). Similarly, one KI at Ministry of Education stated that:

> "We had a project with UNESCO. We have had conferences on quality assurance. And now it's a requirement that every country should have a national quality assurance agency, and that every institution should have a quality assurance unit" (MOEST 01).

One could infer the impact of attending conferences from the above quote, that the official at the Ministry of Education, viewed the development of formal QA system at both national and institutional level as a legitimate requirement. However, the international conferences were viewed by respondents at NCHE mainly in terms of capacity. It was noted that when members of staff are sent to attend conferences and seminars, what they learn helps to support the development and reviews of policy documents and procedures. This did not however, imply them dictating what content to include in the policy documents (NCHE 01).

The other influences of UNESCO were explained in terms of the *UNESCO-Shenzhen Project,* which was implemented in Malawi in 2016. One of the components of this three-year project was to facilitate the establishment of national QA agencies, and institutional capacity building of existing national QA agencies in ten African countries including Malawi (UNESCO, 2018). Four respondents, including one KI at Ministry of Education and three KI at NCHE indicated that in the case of Malawi, the UNESCO-Shenzhen Project provided funding for the development of national standards, procedures and template for curriculum development in HEIs, which currently serve as one key instrument for the national QA system. The other notable impacts of the project were raising awareness on QA and the mandate of the NCHE

nationwide and sharing best practices for the establishment and management of formal QA units in universities.

As the main drivers of QA reforms for higher education at the global scale, leading or at least linked to all the major international initiatives (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019), it was apparent that the World Bank and UNESCO have various ‘soft’ tools to move a country into their preferred policy direction. This eschewed the traditional World Banks’s ‘hard’ imposition of policies via aid conditionality. Dissemination of ideas through education sector studies, trainings and international conferences could be viewed as one tool. International conferences and trainings convened by UNESCO have been shown to provide powerful discursive forums that promote certain policy reforms among various stakeholders who carry the ideas back to their respective context (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019). They also provide platforms that promote transnational problem solving and policy learning, where the agreed solutions contribute to legitimizing reforms at national level (M. Dobbins, Knill, Maria, et al., 2011). The World Bank and UNESCO financing policy learning trips, infrastructure for the national QA agency, and hiring of consultants to develop specific QA frameworks was another mechanism. It can be argued that the World Bank and UNESCO significantly influenced the framing of the QA system agenda and the actual development and implementation of the QA system. This confirmed Maniku (2008) that the development of national QA systems for higher education in developing countries has been actively promoted and financially supported by the World Bank and UNESCO.

6.1.4. Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization of higher education provided both opportunities and challenges for Malawi, which reinforced the need for the formal QA system. Internationalization refers to the “process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at national and institutional level” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). This includes contemporary cross-border education: *people mobility* (student, faculty and Scholar); *programme mobility* (twinning, franchise and distance education/e-learning); and *provider mobility* (branch campuses, joint or double degree programmes and collaborative ventures with local universities) (Knight, 2013). Three sub-themes linked to the discourse of internationalisation, emerged from the data namely: the need to internationalize university programmes and curricula; international affiliation or partnership; and recognition and comparability of qualifications.

6.1.4.1. Need to internationalize university programmes and curricula.

The growing pressure for HEIs to actively seek other sources of income in the context of declining government funding strengthened the need to internationalize university programmes and curricula in Malawi. This was mostly driven by the financial benefits of recruiting international students who are charged higher fees than domestic students. The general concern was that HEIs in Malawi were not well positioned to benefit much from internationalisation. It was noted that the main rationale for Malawian public universities to engage in internationalization has been principally academic and aimed at institutional strengthening; international profile/reputation; enhancing research and knowledge capacities and improving quality of programmes and intercultural skills of students and staff. Although most institutions have links with universities and research institutions around the world by means of student and faculty exchange and collaborative research projects, the recruitment of international students was extremely low. For example, in 2018 there were only 63 international students in public universities and 17 in private universities in Malawi (Kadzamira, 2018). This was attributed to among others, the problem of institutional articulation and quality assurance. Two KI at Ministry of Education stated that the need for the national QA system was part of government efforts to enhance the internationalisation of higher education in Malawi. One KI at Ministry of Education stressed that:

> The government direction was that HEIs must match international standards to be of recognized quality internationally. This required universities to internationalize their academic programmes and curricula and ensure that the content, quality and relevance of their programmes were acceptable both locally and internationally (MoEST 02).

The other KI at Ministry of Education similarly described the internationalization of higher education in Malawi as a futile exercise without a focus on quality. From his perspective, there was a "need to make sure that the higher education system in Malawi was vibrant and this was only possible if a mechanism was devised by government to regulate it" (MoEST 01).

6.1.4.2. International affiliations or partnerships

International affiliation or partnerships here refers "to both formal and less formal links with foreign institutions, be they universities and colleges or professional organizations engaged in educational standards setting or examinations" (Maniku, 2008, p. 184). International affiliation or partnerships between universities is a long tradition that originally served capacity building purposes and maintenance of academic standards. But with growth of cross-border education,

affiliation and partnerships have taken a new meaning as they operate as a mechanism to promote global trade in education services.

The Minister during the presentation of the NCHE Bill No. 31 of 2010 in Parliament observed that there were institutions in Malawi affiliated or in partnership with foreign based universities, citing an example of Malawi Institute of Management (MIM) which was affiliated with the Eastern and Southern Africa Management Institute (ESAMI), University of Derby and Bolton University. But the country did not have the national regulatory framework that considered the cross-border education provision to provide the modus operandi for university affiliation and partnerships. This echoed Jingura & Kamusoko (2018) who observed that while some ‘exporting’ and ‘importing’ countries had developed national frameworks that regulate cross-border higher education, except for South Africa, many countries in Sub-Sahara Africa did not have such systems. In the case of Malawi, the loophole permitted both bonafide and rogue foreign providers to operate in the country and made monitoring their activities difficult. It was observed that although most foreign based universities affiliated with Malawian local universities were called international universities, without any formal system in place it was difficult to determine whether they were credible, which raised concerns about quality. Members of parliament during debate on the NCHE Bill No. 31 of 2010 expressed their distaste with some foreign universities, which they claimed could only be recognized in their local area within their country of origin. It was argued that degrees from those kinds of universities should not be allowed in Malawi. This heightened the need to clarify the status of foreign based institutions, the nature of affiliation or partnership with local universities in Malawi and how these foreign institutions could be accredited and let alone be regulated.

6.1.4.3. Recognition and comparability of qualifications

The recognition and comparability of qualification for purposes of employment and further study has been the major issue for Malawi. The Minister stated during the presentation of the NCHE Bill No. 31 of 2010 in Parliament that the establishment of different types of universities within the country created problems for employers to establish the equivalence of qualifications obtained from different universities. There was no national formal mechanism to validate qualifications. As the Minister narrated:

> “If I am an employer for example, somebody comes to me with a PhD from whatever university, and somebody from the University of Malawi and the two are competing for a job, I have to decide how to establish the equivalence on whether they are equal in quality. How we could make sure that a degree obtained

> from university 'X' is equivalent to a degree from University 'Y' or 'Z' was really a problem (Malawi Parliament Hansards, 2011a, p.998).

Furthermore, the Minister noted the issues of recognition of degrees obtained by Malawians from universities abroad and the demands placed on the government to deal with potential fraud. There were serious concerns where people in Malawi presented degrees from 'diploma mills' or came from oversees with degree from universities that were not credible. This was pointed out by the Minister in the following:

> We have a situation whereby people come from oversees with degrees from all sources of universities. This is where the problem is. There is a lot of fraud these days. We do not want people to be given fake degrees. That amounts to academic genocide. We want people to have credible qualifications that can stand a test of challenge anywhere in the world (Malawi Parliament Hansards, 2011a, pp. 998).

Two Members of Parliament concurred with the Minister during the Parliamentary debate on the the NCHE Bill No. 31 of 2010 that there had been several cases where Malawians had come back from abroad with degrees that were considered 'worthless' because they had gone to institutions that were not accredited. While internationalization opened opportunities for Malawi, it also created a fertile ground for 'diploma mills' and 'fake' degrees. This strengthened the need to define formal mechanisms on how qualifications obtained from outside Malawi would be authenticated and ultimately help to deal with fraud.

Similarly, eight respondents, including three from a public university (Quality Manager, Professor, and Senior Lecturer), three at NCHE and two at Ministry of Education highlighted concerns about recognition of qualifications obtained from Malawi by universities abroad, which impacted on student mobility. When students graduate with their undergraduate degrees in Malawi, they had difficulties to enrol for postgraduate studies in other countries. Respondents underlined cases where students who went for postgraduate studies in South Africa could be told that their degrees were at a lower level (NCHE 01), and they were meant to study for an honours degree before they embark on a master's programme (CS2- PubU-QAD). The same was observed in the United Kingdom where degrees obtained from Malawi especially first degrees, were either looked at with suspicion or sometimes students were told that their degrees were equivalent to a diploma, yet this was not usually the case before (CS3-PubU-AsProf02). "There were many times people complained that when they go to the UK, they are forced to do some bridging courses, before they are admitted into their postgraduate programme of study" (MoEST 01).

Three arguments emerged about this situation. Some felt that the qualifications offered by universities in Malawi left a lot to be desired because the standards of education had gone down (NTWG 02-QAM). Others noted that most undergraduate programmes in Malawi graduate students with a first degree that is not an honours degree. This was the reason people are forced to do an honours degree or bridging courses (CS3-PubU-AsProf02). Still others, underlined the absence of the national qualification framework that could help relate qualifications with other universities elsewhere. It was argued that students from Malawi with an ordinary bachelor's degree from public universities were able to compete very well in their postgraduate studies in other countries, suggesting the quality and standards of qualifications were strong, but the lack of the national system that could validate qualifications was the major problem (CS3-PubU-Prof). This compelled the government to "tighten the nuts and bolts" by developing the QA regulatory system so that the quality of qualifications from Malawi do not lose touch with the world and that students should be competitive globally (NCHE 04).

6.2. National context of influence

The national context appeared to be the main arena for the formulation of the rationale for the formal QA system reform and the subsequent production of its policy text and implementation. Malawi having undergone neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the public sector termed structural adjustment programmes since 1981 (Government of Malawi, 2002), the debate about quality in higher education reflected various national contextual factors associated with these neoliberal transformations. These covered six main themes: (1) growth of private universities, (2) expansion of higher education amidst declining funding, (3) relevance and employability, (4) demands for new managerialism, (5) governance reform of the higher education system, and (6) changing role of the state in regulation of QA.

6.2.1. Growth of private universities

The issue of quality in higher education was mainly linked to the liberalisation of higher education and the rise of private universities. Nine respondents including three KIs at Ministry of Education, four KIs at NCHE and two KIs from HEIs noted that until the early 1990s there was only one public university and a few tertiary education institutions in Malawi. However, it was when private universities started coming up with the liberalisation of higher education, that quality and regulation of the higher education sector became a serious public policy issue. There were many shortcuts taken to establish a higher education institution. Private universities

were just being established without following any standards. This was mainly because the establishment of HEIs was not systematically regulated (MoEST 02).

Although private universities play an important role in serving as immediate safety-net in addressing the overwhelming demand for higher education, for most respondents, quality of education offered in many private HEIs in Malawi had been a major concern. Some cited problems of inadequate academic staff; use of unqualified academic staff and heavy reliance on part-time or adjunct faculty, noting that "part-time staff could be around 80% of the total staff profile" (NCHE 03). The others mentioned that private universities did not invest heavily in infrastructure required to provide quality education and lacked facilities such as science laboratories (MoEST 03). This was attributed to the lack of proper "balance between quality teaching and learning and making profits" (MoEST 02). There were claims that "some infrastructure was very poor. Most private universities operated from shopping malls, others from the back yard, which was a big compromise on quality" (NCHE 01). The Minister articulated similar issues when presenting the NCHE Bill No. 31 of 2010 in Parliament. He explained that:

> For any university to succeed there must be adequate resources, adequate faculty and adequate infrastructure. Private universities affiliated with religious organizations have a means of survival because they depend on resources from religious organizations. However, many for-profit private universities owned by individuals or private groups operate without qualified academic staff, appropriate infrastructure and adequate resources required to provide quality education. Here is where we really have a problem. How do we make sure that they maintain standards? (Malawi Parliament Hansards, 2011a, p. 997).

One key informant at Ministry of Education further indicated that there was a lot of 'craftiness' in private universities. By 'craftiness', he explained that private universities would award postgraduate qualifications even when candidates did not engage in academic activities or without following rigorous assessment and quality standards. The undergraduate curricula were sub-standard. The nature of assessment would concentrate on low-level questions simply to pass students and did not promote critical thinking. He stressed that this "craftiness had to be stamped out, otherwise it was destroying the reputation of the education system" (MoEST 03). This was consistent with literature in chapter three, which indicated that the inception and rapid growth of for-profit private HE brings up issues of quality and standards of education, bolstering demands for government action in terms of QA (Kwiek, 2018). It was evident that the emergence of private universities and the need to regulate their activities was one of the

main triggers for establishing the national QA agency and formal QA system for higher education in Malawi.

6.2.2. Expansion of higher education amidst declining funding

The expansion of higher education in terms of student enrolment and number of institutions amidst declining public funding, was another catalyst for the QA system in Malawi. The implementation of the equitable access policy aimed to expand higher education, compelled the government of Malawi to revisit some of its growth-oriented policies. This was justified by the neoliberal assumption that higher education plays an essential role in producing advanced human capital that can facilitate the move towards a knowledge based economy (MoEST, 2008). The government endorsed Open and Distance E-learning (ODeL); enhanced inclusive education; gender uniformity; and student loan schemes; and changed student enrolment policy from one based on bedspace in university residential facilities to one based on classroom space. Public universities were allowed to enrol what used to be called "parallel" students, now full economic fee paying non-residential students who meet the minimum university entrance requirements. MoEST (2020) noted that this increased enrolment in higher education to 30, 972 in 2018, compared to 8,168 students enrolled in 2008.

However, the pursuit of greater access and quality has been a challenge for the government and institutions to find ways to fund higher education. Although the government allocates relatively high share (20-28 percent) of its overall education budget to public higher education, the funds are largely inadequate to support increased enrollment and quality improvement. This was exacerbated by two factors. First, tuition fees for undergraduate programmes in public universities are determined by the government and public universities are restricted from charging economic fees. Eurydice (2008) noted that this was also the case in the UK, where institutions determine fees for postgraduate, part-time and oversees students but that of full-time undergraduate home students is regulated by government. The aim is to promote fair access to higher education for low-income and under-represented groups. The only difference was that in the case of Malawi, the fees set by government were usually quite low. The annual tuition fees in 2016 was only about MK450, 000 (US$529.41), yet student unit cost for undergraduate programmes ranged from MK1, 522,727 (US$3,461) to MK7, 054,534

(US$16,033)[1]. With lack of diversity in funding sources, this made it difficult for public universities to significantly augment government subventions. The other factor was the drive towards reduction of public funding with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. For nearly two decades (1980-2000) international organizations reduced funding to higher education in developing countries and instead shifted funding to basic education. The impact for Malawi, which primarily depend on foreign aid was that the higher education sector continually faced under-investment for its development budget.

The resulting conundrum for public universities was that it proved difficult to adapt the use of existing infrastructure to the context of higher enrolment. The inadequate equipment and infrastructure both constrained access and compromised quality of standards. The shortage of qualified academic staff resulted in a rise in the student/lecturer ratio, which compelled institutions to have to rely on associate lecturers holding only undergraduate qualifications despite that the government policy required university lecturers to have a minimum of a master's degree. The inadequate funding further meant that public universities could no longer afford to regularly engage external examiners for moderation of quality and standards at undergraduate level. They could also not undertake much research. The limited research and publication were used by those who considered global university ranking as a proxy indicator of quality to explain why universities in Malawi were either poorly ranked or not ranked at all based on the World University Ranking. It was observed that despite public universities having research centres, their research agenda was crude and not responsive to industry needs and that research output remained low compared to other countries in Sub-Sahara Africa. Thus, the 'logic' of expansion of enrolment in higher education significantly affected the pattern of funding and was generally responsible for the potential decline in quality and overall lowering of standards. This contributed to the need for the national QA system.

6.2.3. Relevance and employability

The relevance of programmes offered by universities and employability of graduates has been the major challenge for Malawi, which further contributed to the need for the QA system. The unemployment among Malawi university graduates was thought to be relatively high. For

[1] Academic Planning & Course Committee, APCC (2016). Determination of Staff/Student Ratios and Student Unit Costs in the University of Malawi. Zomba: University of Malawi Central Office.

example, the Malawi labour force survey of 2013 reported that 21 percent of the economically active population (15-64 years) were unemployed. The unemployment rates were higher (28%) among youth in the 15-24 age group, whilst about 44 percent of the youth with tertiary education could stay unemployed for more than two years (Mussa, 2013). Besides the general unavailability of graduates' jobs due to the performance of the economy, this called into question the alignment between academic programmes/courses offered and the national needs. The dominant view was that some of the programmes offered by universities in Malawi were not market driven. One official at NCHE indicated that graduates from Malawian universities "could stay several years without getting a job because their degrees were not acceptable in the labour market" (NCHE 01). Most of the graduates were also unable "to use their acquired knowledge and skills to make a living without formal employment" (NTWG 01- Dean).

Three major factors emerged from the data, which were viewed as contributing to the problem of relevance and employability. Normally, relevance of higher education calls for regular publications and response to manpower surveys, curricula and syllabi reviews and graduate tracer studies. However, the last published National Manpower Survey for Malawi was done by Ian MacDonald and Associates in 1985 (NCHE, 2015d). The country relied on ad hoc donor funded tracer studies and did not have any formal system for National Student or Graduate Surveys. Since the establishment of the first university, the University of Malawi in 1965, only three national tracer studies had been conducted. The first in 1988, which was made possible by the Human Resource and Institutional Development (HRID) project of the United States of America. The second university commissioned tracer study was published in 1996, while the most recent higher education system wide tracer study was conducted by the World Bank in 2010. Similarly, both public and private universities in Malawi did not have any university-wide formal monitoring system in place for getting feedback from their graduates and/or employers relating to fitness for purpose and relevance of their programmes.

The issue of employability was further linked by one respondent from the civil society to the complacence and resistance of the academy to balance liberal aspects of the university and vocational orientation through incorporation of entrepreneurial and employability skills (NCSO 01). The QA director from one public university confirmed that despite the global drive towards incorporating employability skills in curricula, the academy had been resistant stressing that their role was to impart knowledge, while skills should be dealt with by the industry. This could have been also the case due to limited laboratory facilities, lack of

seriousness by lecturers and limited funding to provide industrial attachments. However, the respondent pointed out that universities were being challenged to take both knowledge and skills into account and adopt outcome-based curriculum (CS3-PubU-QAD).

Finally, there was minimal level of curriculum change, despite the widespread recognition of the need for regular curricula review and curriculum development reforms to reflect global trends and changing needs of the country (D. Hall & Thomas, 2005; Valeta et al., 2016). This was attributed to the absence or superficial processes and procedures of curriculum review and development in private universities, and the general lack of involvement of employers and other groups such as students and alumni in reviews and subsequent development of curricula in both public and private universities. One key informant at Ministry of Education stated that "they discovered that some of the programmes in public universities were developed in the 1980s, but nothing was done in terms of curriculum review" (MoEST 03). Thus, concerns about relevance of higher education and the employability of graduates significantly contributed to pushing the issue of the formal QA system on the government policy agenda.

6.2.4. Demands for new managerialism.

The concern for 'quality' woven into the complex mix of neoliberal 'new public management' (NPM) ideologies bolstered demand for new managerialism to strengthen institutional governance and management thereby challenging the existing governance and management structures of HEIs in Malawi. The doctrine and practices of NPM are widely adopted in education reforms, which highlight the importance of QA and its association with notions of institutional autonomy, performance and accountability (Lo, 2017).

Public universities in Malawi had relatively substantive and procedural autonomy with respect to organizational management, academic and staffing matters. However, financial autonomy was limited by government regulation of funding. Also, the State president was designated Chancellor of each public university by statute and was responsible for appointing members of the University Council and approving appointment of Vice Chancellors. The strong relations of political accountability between institutional leaders and the Head of State contributed to tension and limited the autonomy of institutions prescribed by the constitutive Acts of Parliament. The case was widely cited of the closure of one public institution in 2010/11 academic year, after a lecturer was questioned by the police about what he had taught in a

lecture. This created unconducive environment for public universities to fulfil their mandate and undermined their ability to become strong responsive institutions (Mambo et al., 2016).

The related issues concerned the composition of the University Council or Board of Trustees in both public and private universities. The university council or Board of Trustees is responsible for the overall management and administration of institutions and oversight of all university activities. However, the composition of governing councils often lacked diversity in both membership and technical expertise. The council membership in public universities was broadly limited to the academia community and government, while for private universities owned by religious institutions it was generally limited to university personnel, church leadership and lay church members. The Councils could not benefit from the participation of a wider pool of stakeholders including the private sector and civil society. Yet the private sector was an important consumer of higher education output and a potential source of finance that could augment public funding to cover investments costs and improve the quality and efficiency of higher education delivery through public-private partnerships (PPPs). One official at Ministry of Education elaborated in the following:

> University Councils provide strategic leadership. But it is sometimes from a layman's perspective. If you check the Council of the University of Malawi, the Chairperson is Rev. Dr X, a Pastor. At Catholic University, Chair of Council is His Grace Archbishop Z. But the thinking was that we at least needed a diverse technical body. We feel the Council should have diverse people that bring technical expertise to confront contemporary challenges affecting universities (MOEST 01)

The government set out to amend the university Act of parliament to provide for participation of other stakeholders in institutional governance and enact the National Commission for Higher Education to regulate higher education in the *National Policy Investment Framework (PIF 2000-2012)*. The formal QA system was anticipated to help mitigate the tension between the government and universities regarding issues of autonomy and strengthen institutional governance. This was also the trend in other African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania where the position of university chancellor was delinked from the Head of State and in Mauritius and Zambia where government membership in university councils had been reduced or offset by increasing private sector representatives (World Bank, 2009).

Furthermore, traditionally, universities are managed by academics according to collegiate-style management structures coordinated through the system of committees (Eurydice 2008). This

system was still dominant in Malawi public universities but was challenged due to underlining weaknesses. The functioning of various decision-making committees was inefficient, resulting in delays in the conduct of university business activities. There was lack of formalized performance management systems (PMS) and clear regulations governing such processes as the creation of posts, appointments of staff and the tenure system (CS-PubU-VC). The Deans of Faculty and Heads of Academic Department were simply elected by academic members, yet there was evidence that academics that occupied the positions did not have significant expertise in management and administration (CS3-PubU-Prof). The consensus was that effective management of public universities in Malawi was undermined by poor administration capacity and an over-reliance on committees for decision-making. Policymakers emphasised the executive model of management that public universities should create structures for executive deans (CS3-PubU-AProf02). The formal QA system was anticipated to facilitate the professionalization of university management to adequately deal with quality challenges faced by institutions, which was consistent with principles of new public management.

The governance and management had been a very big problem in private universities. Data revealed that most individual or private groups that wished to establish a private university would present the formal governance and management structure to the Ministry of Education for the purpose of registration. But once registered, the management of the university in practice was almost a 'family affair'. By 'family affair' two key informants explained that there were cases where the husband could be the Chairperson of the Governing Council/Board of Directors and Chancellor of the University. The wife could be the Vice Chancellor while children could be appointed in senior management positions. But the government required that universities should have an independent Board of Directors, Council or Board of Governors that is legally established to manage the university effectively while owners/proprietors could just be trustees or shareholders to promote accountability (NCHE 01). One KI at the Ministry of Education narrated several incidences where the owners or proprietors of private universities could just withdraw money from the institutional bank account for personnel use. This in some cases left the institutions in huge debts, which could affect the provision of quality education. He stressed that "NCHE was formulated to regulate these things to ensure that there is quality and that universities are properly governed" (MoEST 01).

6.2.5. Governance reform of the higher education system

The quest for the formal QA system and regulatory framework was linked to governance reforms of the higher education system. Governance in this context refers to the formal structures, policies and rules that articulate the rights and responsibilities of government/public authorities and various actors in higher education, including the frameworks in which an institution pursues its goals, objectives and policies in a coherent and coordinated manner (Eurydice, 2008). Data indicated that the reform mainly focused on governance structures and public funding mechanisms.

6.2.5.1. Governance structures

The *National Education Sector Plan (2008-2017)* stated that "Governance problems are in the system, such as poorly defined governance structures, line of authority and delegation of powers" (MoEST, 2008, p. 24). The higher education sector had been historically fragmented and poorly coordinated. This had been a result of the absence of a comprehensive higher education legal framework and the evolution of diversified stakeholders and multidisciplinary nature of service providers. The legal and regulatory framework of education in Malawi was based on the Education Act of 1962, and now the revised Education Act No. 21 of 2013, which provide guidance to establishment, administration and management of primary, secondary and post-secondary technical and vocation education and training (TEVET). Besides this, TEVET institutions are regulated by the Technical Entrepreneurial Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA), under the TEVETA Act No. 6 of 1999 (Kadzamira, 2018). But higher education was excluded from the Education Act. One key informant at Ministry of Education elaborated:

> When the education Act was being reviewed, it was supposed to cover education as a whole. But higher education was not addressed. The way the governance of universities was framed. As long as universities had the university council, the government was home and dry. Universities could be doing their own things. It is now that we have realised that we need to understand what is going on there (MOEST 03).

Higher education since 1965 had been guided by policy prescriptions in National Development and Educational Plans and governed by separate Acts of Parliament that establish each public university. The Ministry of Education, (MoEST) did not exercise direct control over public universities as these are statutory organizations. The absence of a comprehensive higher education law and policy framework created a gap between HEIs and the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) that stifled policy decisions at different educational levels.

The lack of uniformity in governance and management of universities as well as functioning systems were observed. This contributed to the higher education system characterized by fragmentation, insufficiently articulated mandates across various types of providers, a lack of coherence with regard to curricular across institutions and little intra-system student mobility. In response the *National Education Sector Plan (2008-2017)* stated that:

> "The Government of Malawi will prepare and put in place a Higher Education Act that articulates values and goals of Malawi higher education, creates and defines its governance and generally, institutionalizes a Council for Higher Education as a Regulatory Board responsible for Accreditation and regulating the system for greater efficiency and effectiveness" (p 24)

The enactment of the higher education legal framework and establishment of the National Council for Higher Education to regulate higher education and QA appeared to be part of the governance reform to achieve a coordinated system that could deliver quality higher education.

6.2.5.2. Public funding mechanism

The governance reform in the context of the national QA system also focused on public funding mechanisms. As stated elsewhere, public universities receive 80% of the funding from government in the form of subvention. Three key informants at Ministry of Education indicated that there was no well-defined criteria or formula used by the Ministry of Finance in funding public HEIs in Malawi. The Ministry of Finance used the previous year's funding allocation as a benchmark for an incremental increase taking into consideration anticipated salaries, utilities, student enrolment, teaching and learning materials and other necessities, plus five percent increase to account for inflation. Development budgets were considered separately and evaluated based on need and the availability of funds. It was observed that this traditional funding mechanism of simply aligning allocation with historical precedents or what Mambo, et al., (2016) termed 'historical –based budgeting approach' did not incentivize the improved utilization of the allocated resources and with the absence of performance indicators led to widespread inefficiencies.

However, the feeling was that with the increased demand for higher education, the government plans to establish more public universities and that could suffocate its funding capacity. Public HEIs needed to find new ways of mobilizing resources to boost revenue and reduce their dependence on government funding. The government policy direction was to adopt formula-based funding methods that could be linked to the QA regulatory framework to integrate

incentives and performance measures and reward institutions that meet performance criteria (MOEST, 01). This was incorporated in the mandate of the NCHE to advise the Minister on policies, principles, formula and criteria for allocating public funds to public HEIs. This aligned with global trends, bolstered by the belief that formula-based funding improves internal efficiency of institutions and encourages improved performance in the context of limited resources. There was evidence that the use of formula-based funding that tie public funding to institutional performance had become widespread in Europe (Eurydice, 2008), and the trend was emerging in Africa, where countries such as South Africa, Tanzania and Mozambique have adopted performance-based funding (Mambo et al., 2016). This trend has gone hand in hand with the emerging QA regulatory frameworks and accountability procedures (Eurydice, 2008).

6.2.6. Role of the state in regulation of quality assurance

The regulation of the Malawi HE system has predominantly been a mixture of 'state control' and 'academic self-regulation'. The period from 1965 to 1993 linked to the only public university, which was available at the time, the University of Malawi was characterised by the dominance of academic self-regulation of QA. The role of the state was limited to funding and control of the university council. The university guided by its Act of Parliament had a robust system for self-regulation of academic quality to meet global standards. Internal processes were in place to ensure the standards of academic programmes, courses and assessment procedures. In Maniku's (2008) words, "the business of maintaining quality was more a collegial activity, than meeting a set of bureaucratic requirements" (p.191). Part of the self-regulation was the role played by external examiners who were appointed by the university. University of Malawi was also responsible for accrediting new tertiary education institutions both public and private.

However, from 1993 onwards, the government became more active in the pursuit and regulation of QA, predominantly directed at new universities. With liberalization of higher education and rapid growth of private universities in the 1990s, it appeared the government lost trust in university self-regulation of academic quality. Six key informants indicated that before the establishment of NCHE and the formal QA system, the government had set up the Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) in 1993, coordinated by the Department of Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD) in the office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) until in 2009 when it was moved to the Department of Higher Education (DHE) in the Ministry of Education and Technology (MoEST). The CEC drawing its membership from DHRM&D, University of Malawi and MoEST, Department of Higher Education (DHE)

and Department of Advisory and Inspectorate Services (DIAS) operated as an ad hoc committee. It carried out the functions of registering and accrediting HEIs and programmes, currently undertaken by NCHE. Hayward (2006) observed that this was the trend in a number of Africa countries where there was not any National QA Agency. The Ministry of Education or department was mandated to carryout QA and accreditation although there was usually no evidence that the Ministry departments were carrying out all the responsibilities.

The operation of the Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) in Malawi faced four major issues. First, the CEC did not have standards and formal instruments for assessing and accrediting institutions. Members could inspect an institution using a rudimentary checklist and "just issue a letter of registration and accreditation without necessarily conducting any formal assessment" (MOEST 01). Second, because the CEC operated as an ad hoc committee, with the rapid growth of private universities, it could not expeditiously undertake its functions. NCHE took over 27 outstanding applications to register new universities and programmes that had been submitted to CEC from June 2012- July 2014 (NCHE, 2015d). Third, the CEC did not have any formal structure and an Act of Parliament to provide for its mandate. As the government established more public universities, and the requirements for accountability with declining public funding increased, this made it difficult for the committee to regulate public universities, despite the evidence of declining quality. Forth, the department was only visible when registering and accrediting HEIs and their programmes but did not follow up with institutions in terms of auditing them and other activities. As a result, the Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) was deemed ineffective and delegitimised such that some of the private universities which had been accredited by the CEC were later deregistered by NCHE.

6.3. From QA policy issue to the Government policy decision agenda

The formal QA system for higher education became the official discussion agenda for the Malawi government in 2000, when it was first adopted in the *National Education Plan - Revised Policy and Investment Framework* (PIF 2000-2012). However, it was the National Education Conference organized by the Malawi government from 29th March to 1st April 2005, to 'rethink policies, strategies and best education practices for the 21st Century' that brought the establishment of NCHE and the formal QA system for higher education on the government decision agenda. This followed the recommendations of the sub-committee that looked at higher education issues. One KI at Ministry of Education explained:

> "There was a national education conference which took place around 2005. I was made the chair of the committee to look at the component of higher education. One of the components that we had tackled is quality of higher education. So, it was one of our recommendations from the conference. President Bingu wa Mutharika picked it up and set up a higher-level task force to draft the NCHE bill. That is when we started the process" (MoEST, 03).

The recommendation was picked up by the then Head of State, late President, Bingu wa Mutharika who set up a National Technical Committee to draft the NCHE Bill No 31 of 2010 that would enact the national quality agency and establish the QA system for higher education. Policy makers discussed five major 'problematisation' of quality that influenced the subsequent stages of policy development. Problematisation can be understood as a discursive structure that delimits what issues are considered relevant or important and shapes the way these issues are framed and linked to broader policy debates and proposed strategies and instruments that shape the development of the policy (Bacchi, 2012). One was that quality was a problem of inadequate inputs linked to underfunding and expansion of higher education. Policy makers highlighted issues of universities using unqualified lecturers and having poor infrastructure. This was mainly emphasised in the context of private universities. Second, quality was a problem of governance and management at system and individual institutional level, which contributed to the lack of accountability by universities. Third, quality was a problem of 'comparability and recognition of qualification'. Policy makers stressed that when student graduate with their undergraduate degrees in Malawi, they had difficulties to enrol for further studies to universities in other countries. Forth, quality was a problem of irrelevant programmes and unemployment of graduates in the labour market. As policy makers put it, quality of education was poor, evident by the fact that graduates would be unemployed because their degrees were not acceptable in the labour market. Fifth, quality was a regulatory problem. Policy makers underscored that Malawi has historically had few public universities, which self-regulated their academic quality while state control was limited to funding. But with the rapid increase of for-profit private universities in the 1990s, the government lost trust in university self-regulation of academic quality.

Therefore, when the QA issues entered the government decision agenda it was broadly framed as the 'regulatory and quality control problem'. The Minister pointed out when tabling the NCHE Bill No. 31 of 2010 in Parliament that "for the first time we are going to set up a system of regulation and quality control"(Malawi Parliament Hansard, 2011a, p. 996). The implication was to build a state regulatory regime through the 'agencification' of the national QA system

for higher education. The decision to have the QA system regulated by NCHE was interpreted by some policy makers as part of national historical policy legacy. The government wanted to regulate universities the way it has other national regulatory bodies like the Nurses and Midwives Council, Medical Council of Malawi, the Accountancy board, and Malawi Bureau of Standards, as semi-autonomous government regulatory agencies. However, this was legitimised by dominant global policy discourses and international models of QA.

6.4. Conclusion

The study has shown that the formal QA system agenda for higher education in Malawi had been influenced by a constellation of actors, structural dynamics and policy discourses at global, regional and national level. Global influence significantly manifested through the impact of internationalisation of higher education and learning from international QA initiatives and experiences from other countries. The World Bank and UNESCO supported policy learning, attendance to international conferences, capacity building training and the actual development and implementation of the QA system. It was evident that the World Bank and UNESCO have various 'soft' tools to move a country into their preferred policy direction. The African Union and SADC impacted the QA system agenda mainly through the formation of continental and regional QA structures and qualification frameworks, with which all member countries including Malawi had to comply.

The national setting was however, the main arena of formulation of the rationale for the formal QA system. Despite the external pressure, the QA system agenda was not straightforward. The national historical policy legacy mediated policy reform to the extent that change in approach to QA had been incremental, beginning with the creation of the Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) – the government structure that regulated newly established HEIs from 1993 to 2009. The issue of quality in higher education was problematised in various ways, resulting in framing the problem broadly as a 'regulatory and quality control problem' in which the CEC was delegitimized. The adopted solution was to build the state regulatory regime through 'agencification' of the national QA system for higher education. This demonstrated the impact of globalisation in reconstituting the nation state education polity, in which the national state was increasingly influenced not only by international and regional actors, but also by global discourses that framed the social imaginaries of policymakers but in ways that were mediated by national traditions and policy legacies (Rizvi & Lingard 2010). The next chapter discusses the production of regulatory texts and QA frameworks for the national QA system.

Chapter Seven
Development of policy instruments for the national QA system for higher education in Malawi

7.0. Introduction

This chapter addresses research question two: What are the key characteristics of policy texts relating to the national QA system for higher education in Malawi and how were they produced? As indicated in chapter six, the problem of quality was broadly framed as a 'regulatory and quality control problem'. The adopted solution was to build a state regulatory regime through the 'agencification' of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi. Here, I analysed the development of policy instruments for the national QA system focusing on the 'ensemble' of NCHE texts developed from 2005 to 2020 (Table 9).

Table 9: QA system ensemble of instruments: main actor and policy texts

Main Actors		Policy Texts/Instruments
Ministry of Education	Department of Higher Education (DHE)	• Bill No 31 of 2010: National Council for Higher Education enacted into the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011
QA Agency (NCHE) Bureaucrats	NCHE Board (Council)	• Standards & Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Malawi's Higher Education Institutions (2013) • Standards for Accreditation of Malawi's Higher Education Institutions (2013)
	NCHE Secretariat	• Minimum Standards for Higher Education Institutions (2015) • Accreditation Evaluation Framework; and Assessment tools for higher education institutions (2015)
Experts and/or Consultants	Local Experts	• Standards for curricula and development of Academic Programmes in Higher Education (2016) • Library Standards for Higher Education (2018) • Higher Education ODeL Framework (2020)
	International Experts	• Draft Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) (2019)

The chapter is organized in three broad sections. The first section provides an overview of approaches to development of QA system instruments at national level. The second section discusses the development of NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 that established NCHE. The third section examines the development of QA standards and frameworks by NCHE. A consistent

format is followed. I provide the summary characteristics of the text; then discuss the processes followed in text production drawing insights to the who and how of policy production and premise of rationality. Further, using Campbell (2004) concepts of 'translation' and 'bricolage' I examine the extent policy texts were mutually informed by global and national/local practices. In doing so, I bring out shortcomings inherent in policy processes and signpost potential implications for implementation and outcomes of the national QA system.

7.1. Approaches to development of QA system instruments at national level

Different countries use different approaches to policy development depending on their culture, underlying values and political orientation. Three models of policy development at national level were identifiable from empirical data gathered in Malawi. In some instances, policy making was the prerogative of government and its bureaucracy. Policy development was based on technical knowledge and expertise of government officials regarding what the needs and interests of the public are, and policy-planning processes were centralised. Thus, policy making constituted a process of instrumental and technical rationality (Habermas, 1981) where "policy is announced to stakeholders and handed down for implementation and not necessarily for contestation and debate" (Mhlanga 2008, p. 240).

The other approach is where technical knowledge was needed when it comes to specific tasks, but policy development was deliberative and constituted space for intersubjective communicative rationality through consultative processes with stakeholders (Habermas 1981). The approach was based on democratic principles with the fundamental tenet that stakeholders should participate in policy development and structures and mechanisms were put into place to give effect to this. This approach however, requires substantial resources to facilitate consultative processes, is time-consuming and demands a great deal of tolerance of differential power relations and interests for the attainment of a common goal (Mhlanga, 2008).

The third approach was the use of experts, commissioned by government and its agencies under specific terms of reference. The experts can be external or local and they usually hold meetings around the country with different stakeholders, study existing relevant documents, relate local conditions to similar outside contexts, and compile reports of policy recommendations (Mhlanga, 2008). The policy recommendations reports are presented to relevant government authorities, who adopt them in full or with some alterations (Cloetes et al., 2006). The development of the QA system and state regulatory regime for higher education in Malawi was

typified by a hybrid combination of the three approaches briefly outlined above, although the common phenomenon was to use the consultative approach and expert consultancy approach. I now turn to examine the texts production processes. I provide a general overview of the policy text followed by the analysis of the process of its production.

7.2. Development of state regulatory and QA regime: NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011

Development of formal QA system and regulatory framework for higher education in Malawi evolved in two phases. The enactment of NCHE Act No 15 of 201, which established the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) as the national coordinating agency and the subsequent production of standards and frameworks for QA and accreditation by NCHE. NCHE Act of Parliament No 15 of 2011 was developed from 2005 to 2011. This legal text is structured in the form of 36 sections divided in nine parts and prescribes the principles for the QA system design and legal framework for establishment, functions and powers of NCHE and for regulating higher education. The analysis covered the two broad phases: the formulation of the NCHE Bill; and its enactment into law.

7.2.1. Formulation of the NCHE bill No 31 of 2010

The formulation of the NCHE Bill was coordinated by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST). The main policy actors were the executive arm of government through the MoEST, Department of Higher Education (DHE) led by the Minister of Education and the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs; civil society organizations; the private sector; higher education institutions; and the legislature. Although various policy actors were involved, it would be shown that the policy process was at every stage driven by influential policy elites.

The government followed five generic processes to enact the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011, which included: national technical working group, drafting of bill, consultations and validation, cabinet paper and approval, and legislation (MoEST 01). MoEST formed a national technical group that drafted the NCHE bill and facilitated participation of actors in policy process. This consisted of twelve members: the MoEST, Director for DHE, two from Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, two Vice Chancellors of the existing public universities at the time, five Principals of constituent Colleges of the University of Malawi, and two vice chancellors from private universities (MoEST 03). Thus, the technical group comprised three government policy

elites and nine senior university managers from universities. The Director for DHE, who was part of the technical group explained the process as follows:

> There was what we call consultative meetings with key stakeholders. We put ourselves in two's and went to meet different stakeholders and take down notes. The main stakeholders were the universities themselves, the government, the private sector and civil society organizations. We tapped from them. It was only after some time that we came back to report and consolidated the ideas into a draft bill. After that we invited some selected stakeholders to say this is what we have drafted can we have your input? So, they proposed the input which fed into that draft. Then we moved on now, to draft the final Bill. Once it was finished, it is when it went to Cabinet (MoEST 03).

Respondent claimed that the NCHE bill was developed through a deliberative and consultative process. The technical group from 2005 mapped and consulted 'key' stakeholders, including government officials and others from HEIs, professional regulatory bodies, the private sector and civil society. They also conducted desk reviews by pulling out experiences from other countries through the internet and visited some countries particularly, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya to learn about formal QA systems (MoEST 01). This enabled the technical group to gather ideas and decide on the design of the QA and regulatory system and administrative arrangements required to implement the system. The ideas were consolidated into the initial draft bill with the help of the two lawyers from Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, who provided technical expertise in drafting the bill. A follow up meeting was convened in 2008 at Capital Hotel in Lilongwe where selected stakeholders were invited to validate the draft NCHE bill (CS3-PubU-SnrLect). The respondents alleged that the input from the meeting was used to improve the draft bill after which, a cabinet paper was written and presented by the Minister of Education to the Cabinet, which approved that the NCHE Bill be tabled in Parliament (MoEST 03).

7.2.2. Deconstructing the 'who' and 'how' of drafting NCHE bill

Gale (2007) pointed out that attending to 'who' is given and/or denied greater voice and the 'how' of policy production enables the naming of values and rationality inherent in policymaking. Apparently, power relations and the tendency to deploy taken for granted ideas about technical rationality and functionality limited the opportunity for various stakeholders to potentially contribute to the formulation of NCHE Bill. The NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 was the direct replica of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Act No 1 of 2006 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2006). There was high level intertextuality in terms of generic structure, QA system design principles and the substantive content. It appeared the technical working group

mainly placed priority on aligning the QA system and regulatory framework with what works in other SADC countries. Therefore, it can be argued that the processes of formulating NCHE Bill hardly involved substantive critical deliberation and the consultations undertaken by the technical working group did not afford stakeholders enough latitude to influence the content of the draft NCHE Bill.

The drafting of NCHE Bill significantly involved 'depoliticization' in which "policymaking appeared to be the application of a set of technical rules rather than political decisions about allocating values, which had the effect of narrowing the boundaries of democratic contestation" (Jayasuriya 2015, p. 973). This echoed Simwimba's (2020) sentiments about the neglect of ordinary people in making of laws in Malawi. As he put it:

> The secrecy with which a drafted bill is carried as it comes from the line Ministry and the Ministry of Justice to Parliament was strange. The Bills are not circulated effectively to the public. The public is assumed to be distant and underserving to provide input in the laws that guide them. In a world of technology, one would assume such bills could be sent on soft copies to the nation but more often than not they are printed and made available only to the Members of Parliament. And somehow the citizens are left in the cold (Simwimba, 2020).

This implied that the general trend in drafting of bills in Malawi takes the 'traditional' representation of the democratic process in which bills are produced through mutual agreement but authority to produce is invested in government officials. The process takes a technocratic character that privileges advice of experts and not participation of citizens – who are believed to be represented by Members of Parliament (elected representatives) that eventually decide on the Bill (Gale, 2007).

Similarly, although the process of preparing the NCHE Bill was consultative and aimed for participation of diverse actors, in general the inclusiveness of the policy processes was marginal and respondents' views were varied. Five senior officials at NCHE, the vice Chancellor of the oldest public university who at the time of formulating the NCHE Bill was a professor and most academic managers (deans and heads of departments), QA directors, and ordinary academic staff interviewed at three case HEIs did not know who participated in formulating the NCHE Bill. They were only meant to believe that it was developed by the Ministry of Education through a consultative process. Only one professor at CS3-PubU stated that their former vice chancellor was engaged by government, when NCHE was being

instituted as part of the technical team that led the process. But he stressed that "to the best of my knowledge we were never consulted" (CS3-PubU-Prof).

Three other respondents (QA director, Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer) claimed that if some members of staff were consulted, it means they were engaged in their individual capacity and not in the institutional capacity. This was considered a 'sham' participation, in the sense that when people are invited in their individuals' capacity, they do not seek views of other members of staff from the institutions, yet the Ministry of Education would claim they had representation from HEIs. One respondent elaborated:

> We always have that challenge. If a member of staff is invited to go to the Ministry. Some are invited in their personal capacity based on their expertise. They develop policies there without seeking any input from members of staff and come back. Later the Ministry claims we had representation from your side. That kind of representation is not in order. Just to say we have picked you, and then the university was involved. That is a sham involvement. I think meaningful representation is key, and that is something that has been lacking in our national policy processes (CS3-PubU-Snrlect).

Participation of private universities was even less. The vice chancellor of CS1-PvtU university who was also the chairperson of the Association of Private Universities in Malawi (APUMA) lamented that private universities were at a 'forgotten corner' and did not play a significant role to shape the design of the QA and regulatory framework embodied in the NCHE Act. He explained that the MoEST technical groups were never fully representative. "They take two or three members from private universities but have representation from every public university". Although their former vice chancellor was in the technical group, the respondent claimed that the consultation with staff was minimal (CS1-PvtU-VC). A dean of faculty stated that private universities in Malawi had not reached a level where one could say they were influencing public policy and that the consideration for private universities in the NCHE Bill was very little. He cited a case that private universities were represented by one vice chancellor against two for public universities in the NCHE Board despite that the country had more private than public universities (CS1-PvtU-Dean03).

Harman (2001) noted that in the modern corporatist state, governments tend to give more attention to organised interest groups that are seen to speak for the sector. This was the case in Australia (Vidovich, 2001), the UK (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008, 2010) and South Africa (Cloetes et al., 2006) where the development of higher education regulatory laws that

embedded QA in legislative framework, reflected a constellation of interest, mainly voiced through HEIs corporate groups i.e. Associations of Vice Chancellors and Principals; and Academic staff and student organizations. In line with this, one former president of academic staff union at CS3-PubU indicated that he was invited and attended the validation meeting of the NCHE Bill at Capital Hotel in Lilongwe. However, he was quick to point out that while academic staff unions in public universities were officially recognized by government, their role in the formulation of the NCHE bill was very negligible. This was mainly because academic staff unions in Malawi narrowly focus on issues pertaining to staff welfare and not advancing alternative public policy decisions. They are largely reactive to policy directions already set by government, such that he was the only academic staff union member that was invited to the validation meeting (CS3-PubU-Snrlect). It was further noted that public universities in Malawi did not have an umbrella (corporate) body to collectively advance its interest, while the Association of Private Universities in Malawi (APUMA), was not officially recognized by government (CS1-PvtU-VC). The extent that most policy actors within HEIs could not input into the NCHE Bill, was partly attributed to this problem (MoEST 03).

To sum up, drafting of NCHE Bill was controlled by the government through the MoEST. The process mainly involved senior university managers who formed the technical group and policy actors external to university. The academic community did not have significant input into the NCHE bill, except for specific individuals who were consulted based on their experience and expertise. The literature in chapter three indicated that QA systems models mooted and driven by government policy elites and senior university managers are generally regarded as managerial and bureaucratic and lack ownership of academic staff (Luckett, 2007b; Mhlanga, 2008). The NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 manifested changing power relations through the 'activation' and 'passivation' of actors (Fairclough, 2003). The main actors in the QA system design were the Minister, NCHE Board (the Council) and HEIs. The Minister and the Council were presented as active agents who make things happen, while HEIs were primarily represented in terms of their subjection to regulation with explicit sanctions for non-compliance. Despite the dominant claims that QA was the responsibility of HEIs, NCHE was mandated to prescribe internal QA system for universities. Thus, the QA system model combined technical and bureaucratic elements by removing power from HEIs and giving it to NCHE to control and inspect quality management from institutional to micro-level processes (Salter & Tapper, 2000).

7.2.3. Enactment of the NCHE bill into law – 'Power rather than technical soundness led to policy settlement.'

When NCHE bill was tabled in parliament, there was broad consensus about the need to establish the national QA system and NCHE as the regulatory body. However, Members of Parliament felt some issues about the NCHE bill needed to be corrected. But it was power of the Minister rather than technical soundness of the NCHE Bill that led to policy settlement. This sustained Jackson (2002) critique of Habermas (1981) 'ideal speech situation' discussed in chapter four that it is power not reason that settles disputes in public policy debates and that in the final analysis the 'better argument' is produced through power and not necessarily through rational dialogue.

The Minister of Education and the Department of Higher Education (DHE) led by its director were the most influential actors during the tabling of NCHE Bill in Parliament in 2010. The Director of DHE worked as a very powerful policy entrepreneur, writing the cabinet paper, and the first, second and third reading Ministerial speeches on the NCHE Bill (MoEST 03). The deliberation on the NCHE Bill was structured in four stages. The Minister formally introduced the Bill to the house in the *first reading stage* and indicated the same day for second reading. The Minister opened debate on the bill in the *second reading stage* and wind up by responding to some issues raised by Members of Parliament. Then the Bill went into *committee stage*, which involved detailed line by line examination of separate clauses until all the clauses 1-36 were agreed to stand part of the bill. The Minister provided a report on the Bill showing that it went through the committee stage without amendments. Finally, upon the Minister's request during the *third reading stage,* Members of Parliament passed the Bill into law (Malawi Parliament Hansard, 2011b, 2011a).

Members of Parliament raised various issues on the NCHE Bill. Four are discussed here. There was a view that some of the functions given to NCHE were already being carried out in public universities by the university Council, and therefore "NCHE should be limited to regulating private universities and have no authority on public universities" (Malawi Parliament Hansards, 2011a, p. 1004). The sentiments mirrored the trend in Tanzania and Kenya, where the national QA agency was initially established to regulate private universities only. This proved problematic to foster a harmonized HE system, compelling these countries to review HE laws and expand the QA agency regulatory mandate to cover both private and public universities (Materu, 2007). The Minister responded that like any unitary system of higher

education, the logic dictated that all HEIs had to be regulated by the same mechanism to sustain academic standards. Permitting self-regulation of quality in public universities, while imposing new state regulation structures upon private universities was untenable, given the evidence of declining quality and lack of coherent QA practices in public universities. The Minister further stated that it was not a question of terminating the culture of self-regulation of quality, but rather supplementing it with a more formal and rigorous external assessment process steered by the national QA agency.

Lim (1999) discussing considerations for development of QA systems in developing and transition countries suggested developing simple designs, maintaining modest expectations and taking into consideration that resources may be limited. On the contrary, Materu (2007) observed that national QA agencies at their early stages in Africa were responsible for multiple functions beyond those performed by a typical agency in more developed higher education systems. Similarly, the other issue raised by some Members of Parliament was that the multiplicity of functions given to NCHE would create a challenge of capacity. Specifically, two functions were singled out: harmonizing selection of students to all public universities and developing and regulating a national qualifications framework. Members of Parliament were of the view that NCHE should not be involved in selection of students, but only assure quality of admission standards. The task of selecting students should be left to institutions themselves. Members of Parliament further claimed that requiring NCHE to regulate the national qualifications framework (NQF) was overstretching its mandate, given that it may not have the competence and expertise in other sectors of education, namely primary, secondary and post-secondary technical and vocational education that would also be covered by the NQF.

The third issue was about the independence of NCHE. Five members of Parliament noted that NCHE bill gave too much power to the Minister, citing that the Minister had power to appoint the Chairperson and members of the Council (NCHE Board), approve remuneration, approve final registration and de-registration of private universities, and approve accreditation decisions of the Council. They stated that the Minister's position was a political appointment and giving too much power to the Minister could potentially lead to political interference and compromise the independence of the Council. Members of Parliament recommended that NCHE should be operationally independent. It was suggested that the Minister should appoint Members of the Board (the Council) that would later be confirmed by the Public Appointment Committee of Parliament and that the Minister's functions should be limited to that of supervision of the

operations of the Council but not being actively involved in decision undertaking (Malawi Parliament Hansards, 2011b, p. 1031).The Minister contested that the public appointment committee could not guarantee NCHE's independence, because it too was a political body, comprising political party members in parliament.

The fourth issue was that the higher education regulatory framework proposed in the NCHE Bill was inadequate and that the government needed to work on a comprehensive higher education law. Members of Parliament noted that Malawi did not have a unified higher education law or legal framework. One Member of Parliament pointed out that higher education was not included in the existing Education Act. Public universities and other governance organizations in higher education were guided by independent Acts of Parliament. The NCHE functions overlapped with the mandate given to University Councils and Senate by their Acts of Parliament, but the NCHE Bill did not propose repealing the existing laws, to avoid potential regulatory tension that could affect the operations of NCHE. The Member of Parliament went further to ask: "Mr Speaker Sir, on what unified higher education legal framework will the NCHE operate to avoid conflicts?" (Malawi Parliament, 2011a, p. 1008).

Thus, it was evident that Members of Parliament felt there were some issues that needed to be corrected, but the government made no amendment to the NCHE Bill. Although the complex processes of the production of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 were abstracted into a nominal group *'An Act enacted by Parliament of Malawi*', and despite that some flaws were identified, parliamentary deliberations did not influence changes to the content of the NCHE Bill. The role of the legislature was almost symbolic or tokenistic and served to legitimate decisions that had already been taken by the executive arm of government. It appeared the Minister of Education instigated a policy settlement for the NCHE regulatory framework that was sub-optimal and flawed. The NCHE Bill was enacted by Parliament even though it failed to establish a broad consensus of support for its technical soundness. This fragile policy settlement manifested several unresolved anomalies and inconsistencies that contributed to contestations about the regulatory role of NCHE and implementation of the QA system mainly among policy actors within universities.

7.3. Development of standards and frameworks for QA and accreditation by NCHE

NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011 mandated NCHE to develop regulations and specific instruments including QA standards and frameworks that would operationalize the national QA and regulatory system. NCHE used two approaches to policy production: (1) development by NCHE bureaucrats and (2) by expert consultancy approach.

7.3.1. Development of QA standards and frameworks by NCHE bureaucrats.

Development of policy instruments by NCHE bureaucrats in the words of Ball (1998, p. 126) had been a "ramshackle compromise hit and miss affair" in which policy texts were discarded, reworked and tinkered with in the process. When NCHE begun operating, most senior agency staff did not have formal training and adequate knowledge of formal QA systems (NCHE 05), hence they had difficulties to adapt standards drawn from elsewhere to the local context of Malawi. The process also reflected the complex relationship between globalised QA reforms and national interests and the dynamic tension and dilemmas associated with translating international QA models to the national context. It was evident that among NCHE bureaucrats themselves, there were fundamental differences on the ontology and philosophy of the QA system and what should be the appropriate QA standards design.

NCHE commenced its operations with appointment of the first Board Members (the Council) in February 2012. However, until 2014, it did not have its own Secretariat but relied on a lean secretariat from the Malawi University Development Programme (MUDEP) which was set up to establish new public universities. From 2012 to 2013 a taskforce was set up within the Council that developed two policy instruments: '*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Malawi's Higher Education Institutions'* (NCHE, 2013a); and '*Standards for Accreditation* of *Malawi's Higher Education Institutions'* (NCHE, 2013b). Materu (2007) stressed that successful development of standards and criteria for accreditation requires broad consultation. However, the first Chairperson of the Council explained that there was very little consultations with stakeholders during the production of the two policy instruments. The taskforce relied on their experiences and on reviewing standards from elsewhere and that they mainly adapted 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ESG); and 'Standards for Accreditation by the Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' (SACS-CC) in the USA (NCHE 05). The philosophy that underpins the ESG was adopted that standards should be broad, generic and follow the non-prescriptive approach to respect diversity; institutional autonomy tempered by

heavy responsibility; and external QA system that is "fit for purpose" to place only an appropriate and necessary burden" (Kohoutek, 2009, p. 80; NCHE, 2013a, p. 3).

However, when the full-time NCHE secretariat was appointed in 2014, the two policy instruments were set aside. The NCHE secretariat officials claimed they found the broad and generic standards to be difficult to operationalize (NCHE 01). One elaborated that generic and non-prescriptive standards were open to subjective interpretation that would have created difficulties to agree on the appropriate level of compliance (NCHE 02). Also, the standards purely based on Western quality arrangements were considered 'high standards' and not applicable to the specific context of Malawi. By 'high standards' another NCHE official claimed European standards assumed institutions were already of more than acceptable quality and aimed to incite them to strive towards improving quality of their processes, outputs and outcomes. This was considered ineffective to deal with institutions and programmes of uneven and sometimes unacceptable quality offered by most (commercial) providers in Malawi. The respondent cited for example that "the European standards and guidelines (ESGs) do not talk about inputs, yet universities in Malawi were struggling with basic inputs" (NCHE 03). Two other officials at NCHE and MoEST contended that the policy instruments were not adequately adapted to the national and local context. One claimed that: "It was just copy and paste. The Council plagiarized the documents in away, which placed NCHE in an awkward situation" (NCHE 02). Thus, although NCHE eventually sought authorisation to use the standards from the concerned bodies, the two policy instruments were simply taken as resource materials (MoEST 03).

Instead, the NCHE secretariat adopted the philosophy of prescriptive minimum standards-based approach. According to Martin & Stella (2007):

> "Minimum standards-based approach usually addresses input factors relating to students, staff, buildings, facilities and finances, as well as process elements such as governance and management systems, and also research activities, which are perceived to form the minimum conditions under which a meaningful higher education institution can function. The main objective of the QA system based on minimum standards is to enforce conformity with standards and accountability and weeding out institution and programmes of unacceptable levels of quality" (p. 50-51).

Thus, from 2014 to 2015 NCHE developed the '*Minimum Standards for Higher Education in Malawi*' (NCHE, 2015c) and two operational tools: '*Assessment form for Higher Education*

Institutions' (NCHE, 2015b) and the '*Accreditation Evaluation Framework'* (NCHE, 2015a) to support implementation of the Minimum Standards. The Minimum Standards document is the primary and core instrument that guide NCHE to register and accredit institutions and programmes in Malawi. It prescribes thirteen standards and criteria with detailed description of indicators under each criterion in line with principles explicated in sections 15 and 16 and sections 27 to 29 of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011. The standards and criteria broadly focus on two areas: (1) institutional governance and management; and (2) academic programmes. Table 10 provide a summary outline of the standards.

Table 10: Minimum Standards for Higher Education Institutions in Malawi

Institutional Governance & Management	Academic Programmes
1. Vision, Mission and Core Values	8. Academic Programmes
2. Governance Structure	9. Staff Complement
3. Governing Policies and Procedures	10. Student Admission and Recruitment
4. Financial and Material Resources	11. Academic Assessment
5. Physical Facilities	12. Specification and Classification of Qualifications (Degree Specification)
6. Water and Sanitation	13. Quality Enhancement
7. Student Support Services	

Source: NCHE (2015). Minimum Standards for Higher Education Institutions in Malawi.

The aforementioned policy instruments were developed by the NCHE Secretariat Staff, but the approach was highly deliberative and consultative. Although the process was iterative, four major phases could be identified: desk review and development of draft documents; consultations; validation and approval; and dissemination. Three NCHE secretariat officials provided a detailed outline of the production process. One NCHE official explained:

> We first worked as secretariat. We did a desk review of the various standards; the European, American, African and SADC quality assurance standards. When we did this desk review, we learnt the format, the presentation, and the content. We got this from all these countries. Thereafter, we chose what we thought was reasonable for Malawi. We also went to universities to check if they have got the required policies that contribute to the quality of education. It was like trying to establish the baseline. We also worked with the Ministry of Education to align the standards with the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) so that we do not just take the standards from Europe. Then we developed a draft document and started the consultations (NCHE 01).

NCHE Secretariat staff conducted desk reviews of QA standards and guidelines from other countries. They reviewed standards at international level, mainly the European standards and guidelines for QA and the American standards for accreditation. They also reviewed the QA standards at African continental regional level and within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region where Malawi is found. The minimum standards document acknowledged several documents that were consulted in the reference section that included standards from Europe, United States of America, Japan, Kenya, Lesotho, South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Namibia and Tanzania (NCHE, 2015c). The review of international and regional QA standards had an influence on both the presentational format and content of the policy instruments, although respondents claimed this did not imply passive copying of foreign models. The aspects which were considered valid and contextually feasible to Malawi were adapted. NCHE staff further reviewed existing QA procedures and practices in universities and government policy documents and plans for higher education in an attempt to ensure that the Minimum Standards were also informed by local practices. The assessment form for HEIs and accreditation evaluation framework drew their design, dimensions covered, and rating scales from the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM), which is a quality assessment tool for higher education institutions in Africa endorsed by the conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union in 2007 (African Union, 2013). This culminated into draft standards documents that were later used to facilitate policy dialogue.

The NCHE organized three regional consultative meetings covering the geographical regions of Malawi namely, northern, central and southern region so that universities and other stakeholders would input into the policy documents (CS3-PubU-R). Prior to consultative meetings, draft documents were emailed to vice chancellors of both public and private universities so that they could seek input from their members of staff. However, such kind of engagement never took place in some universities (NCHE 01). One NCHE official further revealed that only senior university managers namely: vice chancellors, college principals, registrars, finance officers, librarians, quality assurance directors and few deans of faculty, were invited to attend consultative meetings (NCHE 02). Participants indicated that they deliberated on the minimum standards, going through section by section and provided input. However, the questions about feasibility – whether standards were implementable in Malawian universities had been highly contentious. One NCHE official admitted that when they "were presenting the draft standards, people raised concerns that the standards were too high" (NCHE 01). Another one stated that the common expression was that "they call them minimum

standards, but these are high standards and not minimum, some of them are maximum standards" (NCHE 03). Participants from HEIs believed some minimum standards criteria were not realistic and that no university in Malawi could fulfil them. They indicated their disagreement for example, with standards and criteria: "student to computer ratio of 5:1; student to lecturer ratio of 18:1; and for academic staff mix of 20% to be professors, 40% senior lecturer and 40% lecturers, noting that the country did not provide conditions required for their successful implementation in both public and private universities.

Two NCHE officials claimed that based on the input from participants, changes were made, which included removing some standards that participants felt were not feasible to the context of Malawi. Whilst this could be corroborated by some participants from higher education institutions, the others including one vice chancellor from private university claimed that despite providing input to the draft minimum standards, NCHE did not make any changes. "The final document was almost word for word of what they had indicated already" (CS1-PvtU-VC). Thus, some actors felt the changes made by NCHE were not substantive. But one NCHE official argued that the contentious minimum standards and criteria were derived from the Government of Malawi, National Education Sector Plan (NESP 2008-2017) and have remained contentious. "NCHE chose to defend what was already approved as government policy" (NCHE 02). This showed that the development of Minimum standards was to some extent influenced by power relations in which NCHE bureaucrats both drafted the documents and controlled what changes could be made based on input from participants.

The next step was validation and approval. NCHE set up a six-member task force, comprising QA directors, two from private universities and four from public universities (NCHE, 2015c) who attended a one week workshop at Nkopola Lodge in Mangochi district to review and finalize the policy documents. Two members of this taskforce confirmed that their task was mainly editorial, to improve the formatting and presentation of the standards. One member explained:

> Finally, a small team was put together to do the final editing and packaging. That is what some of us got involved in now apart from the consultative workshops. We were at Nkopola Lodge close to a week just doing that task to ensure that major issues were not left out and that the standards are well read out, simple enough and well understood by everyone (NTWG01-Dean).

Thereafter, draft documents were submitted to the Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) of the Council, which reviewed the documents and made its recommendations. One NCHE official stated that further changes were made based on the observations of this committee although when probed, she could not mention any specific changes (NCHE 01). Draft standards were then submitted to the Council, which approved them in October 2015 to become part of the 'ensemble of policy instruments' for the QA system and were endorsed (gazetted) by the Minister of Education. NCHE organized a dissemination meeting at national level in December 2015 at Golden Peacock Hotel in Lilongwe, which was attended by senior university managers from both public and private universities. The approved minimum standards for higher education; accreditation framework; and assessment form for HEIs were presented and participants were informed that going forward, the instruments would be used to assess institutions for registration and accreditation (NCHE 02).

It was evident that development of the minimum standards, assessment tools and accreditation framework was deliberative and highly consultative, but consultation with universities mainly targeted senior university management. Whilst in other countries such as South Africa and Mauritius the standards and criteria for QA and accreditation were first piloted before full implementation (Materu, 2007), NCHE did not pilot the minimum standards before deployment. One NCHE official revealed that this was because the NCHE Secretariat was working under extreme public pressure to start accrediting institution immediately (NCHE 02). As a result, the shortfalls could be identified during the process of accrediting institutions.

7.3.2. Development of QA standards and frameworks by commissioned experts.

NCHE commissioned local and international experts to develop four policy instruments:

i. Template for programme development and course specification (NCHE, 2016);
ii. Library standards for higher education (NCHE, 2018);
iii. Higher education qualifications framework (NCHE, 2019a) and
iv. Higher education ODeL framework (NCHE, 2020a).

Cloetes et al., (2006) and Mhlanga (2008) stated that expert consultancy approach involves local or external experts holding meetings with stakeholders around the country, studying relevant documents, relating local and international contexts and compiling reports of policy recommendations that are presented to government authorities who adopt in full or with some changes. Bijlsma, Bots, Wolters, & Hoekstra (2011) argued that although expert-based

approach may include interaction with stakeholders, this does not necessarily entail a participatory approach. Kauko, Takala, & Rinne (2018) stressed the expert's tendency to cartelize themselves by creating institutional barricades, arguing that they control knowledge production and decide what is valid and legitimate policy knowledge, which can serve to expropriate ordinary policy actors' critical reflection and decision-making capacity in favour of expert discourses, resulting in problems with the policy design and implementation.

The study found that different groups of experts commissioned by NCHE had different terms of references, although policy development generally involved: (1) scoping or baseline study, (2) policy workshops, and (3) validation and approval. NCHE officials stressed that policy workshops were deliberately designed to ensure that policy development was participatory (NCHE 02). Since a similar approach was followed in developing policy instruments (ii) and (iv), details about the former can be found in **Appendix IX**. What follows is the discussion of the characteristics of the other three policy instruments and how they were produced.

7.3.2.1. Development of template for programme development and course specification

Chapter six indicated that one problematisation of quality concerned relevance of programmes and employability of graduates. To enhance quality of curricula and harmonize the structure of programme curriculum for HEIs in Malawi, NCHE developed the: *Template for programme curriculum development and course/module specification* which was published in 2016. The policy document prescribed three notable requirements. The robust curriculum development and review process that institutions should follow and explicitly document with clear justification and rationale of the programme linked to institutional mission, national development agenda and global trends. Second, the adoption of outcome-based approach to education and mandatory field experience with prescribed credits for programmes requiring internship/industrial attachment. And third, the incorporation of QA mechanisms in programme curriculum particularly; curriculum review after every programme cycle; benchmarking at national, regional and international level; guidelines for monitoring and evaluation of teaching/learning (peer observation, course and lecturer evaluation by students and tracer studies); and guidelines for internal and external validation of assessment and moderation of examination and grading system (NCHE, 2016).

The development of the policy instrument took a unique approach that in policy theory Elmore (1980) and Sabatier (1986) called a ‘bottom-up adaptive’ approach, which emphasises developing policy instruments by building upon the observations of actors at local level. This ensures the practicality of policy design to address issues concretely based on what obtains on the ground (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002). NCHE with funding from UNESCO-Shenzhen project, organized two consecutive policy workshops on curriculum development in 2016, which took place at Linde Motel in Mponela, Dowa District. Four NCHE officials indicated that the workshops brought together practitioners, mainly faculty deans and heads of department from HEIs to develop the policy instrument. This was corroborated by one head of department at CS1-PvtU. He explained:

> We had a meeting at Linde Motel in Mponela, where NCHE invited different institutions on the development of programmes, revision of programmes and standards which we should follow as universities in Malawi. I was representing the university. I went to present on how we develop our programmes and how we review our programmes. In fact, prior to the meeting universities were requested to submit a presentation on how to produce and revise programmes. So, we produced and submitted the presentation, which I went to present (CS1-PvtU-HoD).

Respondents concurred that - representatives from public universities and selected private universities attended the workshops on curriculum development. Prior to the workshop, the invited institutions had to prepare and submit a presentation to NCHE on policies and procedures that they follow to develop and review academic programmes. At the workshops participants made PowerPoint presentations on existing practices of academic programme development; deliberated on specific issues relating to academic programme development; and agreed on the common programme curriculum design and course specification. Then they developed the standards for programme curriculum development and template for programme curriculum and course specifications. This was adopted by NCHE Secretariat and approved by the Council to form the national standard for programme curriculum development in higher education in Malawi. There was evidence (see chapter nine) that the nature of policy production on curriculum development standards, generated political benefits by establishing the common ground and areas of agreement with HEIs that enhanced support and ownership for curriculum reform (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002).

7.3.2.2. Development of the higher education qualifications framework (HEQF)

As indicated in chapter six, the other problematisation of quality concerned comparability and recognition of qualification. Thus, NCHE developed the *Higher Education Qualifications Framework* (HEQF) in 2019. The HEQF forms a subset (sub-framework) of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which at the time of this study was being developed by the Malawi Government, championed by the Directorate of Inspection and Advisory Services (DIAS) within the Ministry of Education (MoEST 01). The MoEST constituted Technical Groups for the sub-sectors of education namely: general education; technical, entrepreneurial vocational education and training (TEVET); and higher education to develop sectoral qualifications frameworks that would eventually be consolidated into an integrated, comprehensive and inclusive NQF for Malawi (NCHE 02).

The HEQF for Malawi illustrated in Table 11 has six levels starting level five (L5) to level 10 (L10). The lower levels are for the general education and technical vocational education and training which covers L1 to L4. Like qualifications frameworks in other countries, the architecture of qualifications on the HEQF are aligned by level using defined level descriptors that indicate the complexity of learning at various level in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. Level descriptors outline how the learning outcome for each qualification can be specified. To indicate the volume of learning, a credit allocation system is used that equates 10 notional learning hours to 1 credit. Thus, every registered qualification is specified in terms of learning outcomes and credits at a corresponding HEQF level. This means qualifications can be compared with one another and the same criteria can be used when evaluating foreign qualifications. The HEQF for Malawi further provides flexibility for lifelong learning by defining two learning pathways: Academic and Professional, that is made possible through the application and practice of Credit Accumulation Transfer (CAT); Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC), linked to the prescription of the core and pre-requisites for entry into programme at a particular institution.

Table 11: Higher education qualifications framework for Malawi

Level	Qualification	Knowledge	Skills	Competence	Minimum Credits
L5	Certificate	Holders of the qualification should be able to recall and retain basic principles, standards and demonstrate a broad comprehension of the subject matter, with ability to analyse information and construct a coherent argument	Holders of the qualification should be able to apply wide range of basic principles and technical and/or scholastic skills in variable context using standard and nonstandard procedures, often in combination	Holders of the qualification should be able to perform the basic duties in the right manner, assimilates skills and knowledge and be able to performs basic function with demonstration of understanding of basic fundamental principles of the filed under supervision.	120
L6	Diploma/ Advanced Diploma	Holders of the qualification should be able to select, and apply, collate, analyse and synthesized a range of specialized technical or theoretical knowledge, standard and non-standard processes relevant to the field of work or study	Holders of the qualification should be able to demonstrate ability to apply specialist knowledge and skills both standards and non-standard, and analyse and generate solutions to familiar and unfamiliar problems	Holders of the qualification should be able to utilize skills and knowledge in a wider context, demonstrate relevant skills in deriving solutions in dynamic context and provide some leadership with complete self-management, learning and performance.	240
L7	Bachelor's Degree	Holders of the qualification should be able to demonstrate understanding of a major discipline with possible areas of specialization in that discipline, including command of the ideas, principles, concepts, chief research methods and problem solving techniques of the recognized discipline.	Holders of the qualification should have critical independent thinking and analysis of the subject matter and advanced communication with team building and collaborative skills.	Holders of the qualification should demonstrate knowledge, skill and competence of subject matter in an area of specialisation, able to conduct research, challenge status quo, bring innovation, entrepreneurship, communicate properly, have technological literacy and lead a diverse team	480
L8	Bachelors Honours Degree	Holders of the qualification should demonstrate knowledge of regulations, codes, standards, ethics, and critical understanding of the principle, theories, methodologies, current research and literature of the discipline	Holders of the qualification should have the ability to analyse problems, design, formulate and offer solutions using independent coherent and critical understanding of the principles, theories and methodologies of a particular discipline guided by research	Holders of the qualification should apply knowledge and skills for the design of solutions, have ability to conduct investigations and research with all independence and supervision of others, and interpret, prepare and write professional reports within context.	600
L9	Masters Degree	Holders of the qualification should demonstrate deeper understanding of the subject matter, theory, concepts and principles of the subject matter showing critical awareness of current problems and new insights at the forefront of the discipline areas.	Holders of the qualification should be able to conduct deeper and advanced research using complex intellectual analysis and independent thinking in new situations in solving problems based on knowledge and evidence	Holders of the qualification should be able to provide leadership independently and demonstrate mastery of theoretically sophisticated subject matter's skills and knowledge, with critical understanding of current issues and new insights in the field of specialization and apply evaluative research findings and make judgement based ion knowledge and evidence.	240
L10	Doctorate	Holders of the qualification should demonstrate knowledge at the most advanced frontier of field of study or professional practice, contributed through research judged by independent experts applying international standards.	Holders of the qualification should demonstrate critical reflection on existing knowledge or practice and the creation of new knowledge through research which is evaluated by independent experts against international standards.	Holders of the qualification should demonstrate competencies in knowledge contribution and creation through research and consultancies, sustainable commitment to the professional integrity and to innovation, engagement in critical dialogue, and development of new practice at the forefront of discipline or professional practice.	360

Source: NCHE (2019). Higher Education Qualification Framework (Draft). Lilongwe: NCHE

NCHE hired an international consultant from Mauritius with financial support from the World Bank, *Skills Development Project* (SDP) which was coordinated by NCHE for five years since 2013, who developed the higher education qualifications framework (HEQF) for Malawi. Two NCHE officials claimed the hiring of an international consultant was a requirement under the World Bank project mainly due to lack of local capacity, since many people in the higher education sector in Malawi did not have adequate knowledge about qualification frameworks. However, terms of reference were deliberately designed to provide for a policy development structure that ensured participatory policy processes. According to respondents, this was meant to build awareness among institutions about the HEQF; improve buy-in from university constituents that would be responsible for its ultimate implementation; build capacity of local staff to develop institutional qualification frameworks and ensure that the HEQF development process had a significant interface with the local context (NCHE 02).

Data revealed that at the outset, the consultant conducted a scoping study of qualifications within the Malawi higher education sector in relation to similar qualifications in other countries. This involved the study of existing institutional qualifications frameworks; interviews with officials at Ministry of Education, professional regulatory bodies and staff in about fifteen higher education institutions; and review of prominent national qualifications frameworks specifically, the one from New Zealand, South Africa, and Mauritius as well as the SADC Regional Qualifications Framework (NCHE 04). The key outputs were the scoping study report and draft HEQF document. Then, NCHE Secretariat staff and the consultant visited selected public and private HEIs, where the consultant presented the scoping study report and draft HEQF and engaged participants in policy dialogue to reflect on different aspect of the HEQF. The NCHE official attested that policy dialogue took the format of a workshop:

> He would pick up issues and start elaborating on those issues, linking what he observed and what is happening elsewhere. Then he would say let us now have group work, where participants would be given some literature to read, and then try to develop what we call the level descriptors. They would present and then there would be discussion. That is how it was developed (NCHE 02).

The above sentiments were confirmed by respondents from two case study HEIs who indicated that "the NCHE consulted quite a lot during the formulation of the higher education qualifications framework" (CS3-PubU-Dean01). The registrar at CS1-PvtU indicated that they had a meeting in the board room with members of academic staff, management and NCHE officials. The consultant presented the HEQF and they had discussions. There were questions

and critiques until they agreed on what should stand (CS1-PvtU-R). NCHE further organized a validation meeting of the higher education qualifications framework. The vice-principal of CS2-PubU confirmed that the validation meeting was attended by vice chancellors and principals from public and private HEIs, and officials from Ministry of Education and professional regulatory bodies. The consultant presented the final draft HEQF. Participants discussed various issues related to the architecture of the HEQF and its applicability to the Malawian context and provided input (CS2-PubU-VP). The HEQF was reviewed and finalized by the consultant and submitted to NCHE. At the time of the study what remained was Council approval and incorporating the HEQF within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), being developed by the Government of Malawi, through the Ministry of Education.

7.3.2.3. Development of the higher education ODeL framework

The *higher education open and distance e-learning (ODEL) framework* was published by NCHE in 2020. Chapter six indicated that the Malawi government adopted Open and Distance E-learning (ODeL) policy strategy to expand access to higher education. Higher education institutions started to develop and deliver education through the ODeL mode using varied strategies and approaches, which were neither coordinated nor guided by a national framework. This made it difficult to regulate and monitor the quality and delivery of ODeL programmes. The higher education ODeL regulatory framework was developed to harmonize the development and delivery of quality ODeL programmes and regulate the quality of ODeL systems management in HEIs in Malawi. The framework has two main components. The first component outlined the standards and guidelines of the ODeL framework covering seven key areas namely: learner support system; delivery mode; programming; management; financing, ICT, and quality assurance. The other component explicated the monitoring and evaluation system, which provided indicators to be tracked on each of the seven key areas to measure progress in ODeL programming (NCHE, 2020a).

The development of the higher education ODeL policy framework was also funded by the World Bank, *Skills Development Project* (SDP). The NCHE hired a local consultant who conducted a baseline study of ODeL in higher education institutions in Malawi. The consultant also reviewed existing NCHE minimum standards and regional frameworks particularly, the SADC *Regional Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework.* The SADC regional ODL framework is "the key instrument in harmonising and standardising the provision of ODL in and across the SADC region and provides fourteen focal areas for Member States" (SADC,

2012, p. 2). This informed seven focal areas recommended by the consultant which formed the building blocks of the ODeL framework for Malawi namely: delivery mode; programming; management; learner support system; quality assurance; ICT; financing; and monitory and evaluation (NCHE, 2020a). Then NCHE constituted a task force comprising officials from Ministry of Education, some local ODeL experts, and ODeL coordinators or Directors from public and private HEIs in Malawi that were delivering education through the open and distance e-learning (ODeL) mode to develop the national higher education ODeL policy framework (NCHE 03). One members of the taskforce explained that NCHE organized three consecutive policy workshops held at Blue Waters Lakeshore Resort in Salima District where members of the task force deliberated on the ODeL situation analysis report and developed the standards and guidelines of the ODeL framework based on the seven focal areas recommended by the consultant.

However, unlike the previously discussed HEQF, but similar to 'Library Standards' in appendix VIII, the development of ODeL framework did not involve any further consultations with the higher education community. The task force only relied on the baseline study report by the consultant (CS2-PubU-HoD). After the task force had developed the policy framework, a five-member team of local ODeL experts was further constituted and tasked to validate, review and finalize the ODeL framework (NCHE, 2020a). The team improved the formatting and presentation of the ODeL standards. Then the ODeL policy framework was submitted to NCHE and it was adopted and approved by the Council to become the national higher education ODeL policy framework and form part of the QA system instruments.

Therefore, the significant observations were that different groups of experts commissioned by NCHE had different terms of reference and that deliberate efforts were made to design structures that ensured participatory policy development through policy workshops. There were cases of the production of the template for programme curriculum development by local experts from HEIs that took a bottom-up adaptive approach, which emphasised building upon observations of actors at local level. It appeared this generated political benefits by establishing the common ground and areas of agreement with HEIs which increased support and ownership for curriculum reform. The HEQF production also provided participatory structures, including the consultant visiting HEIs and engaging participants in policy dialogue to reflect on different components of the HEQF. Conversely, although local experts were mandated to develop library standards and higher education ODeL framework, the approach

was technocratic and did not involve consultations with the higher education community. Thus, despite attempts by NCHE to integrate participatory structures within the expert-based policy text production meant to improve the technical design and policy buy-in by varied actors, for some policy instruments, technical and instrumental rationality appeared to be the main if not the sole motivation and policy development was the prerogative of experts.

7.3.3. Deconstructing the 'how' of production of QA standards and frameworks

The development of QA standards and frameworks adumbrated above was fundamentally the process of 'translation': a matter of learning and adapting ideas originating from elsewhere; and 'bricolage': drawing upon principles, procedures and practices that existed in the Malawi's higher education system (Ball, 1998; Campbell, 2004). Text production involved 'translating' QA models, standards and frameworks developed at international, African continental and SADC regional level. However, deliberate efforts were made that QA models, standards and frameworks being enacted from elsewhere should be modified and otherwise altered in varying degrees and combined with practices that already existed in the Malawi's HE system.

NCHE inherited the existing policies and procedures in public universities in Malawi (CS2-PubU-HoD) and drew some standards from the Malawi National Education sector plans (NCHE 01). However, the QA system model, standards and framework were mostly informed by practices from elsewhere (NCHE 02). The dominant rationale was that translating international QA models was necessary for Malawi's higher education system to maintain international standards and global competitiveness. NCHE documents emphasised that:

> "NCHE has the mandate to domesticate, contextualise and share international protocols and best practices that will enhance quality in Malawi and help the nation adopt what is considered the best models which will be internationally competitive and nationally practical"(NCHE, 2019b, p. 9)

This echoed Kohoutek (2014) that integrating international QA models and standards into the national standards and criteria for QA fosters mutual understanding and recognition of QA and accreditation processes, which is important in promoting international recognition of qualifications and facilitating academic and labour mobility. For instance, NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 enacted the QA system model comprising: the national coordinating body (NCHE); standards and criteria for QA; and accreditation as the main methodology. The accreditation framework prescribed procedures including: self-assessment, external evaluation by peers

(peer review); written report; Council decision; and approval by the Minister (NCHE, 2015a). This constitute the 'global model of QA in higher education' (Brennan & Shah, 2000) based on one originally developed for European countries by van Vught & Westerheijden (1994).

Policy text production was more sensitive to the African Union (AU) continental and SADC regional QA frameworks and practices in other SADC countries. Malawi's signatory to African continental and SADC regional protocols and the strong normative view of internationalisation and harmonization of higher education and QA system was explicitly used by NCHE and MoEST officials as a powerful condensation symbol to appropriate politics and contestation. Where there were serious contestations, the logic of appropriateness was used in which conforming to prevailing norms superseded critical dialogue and interrogation. Thus, some standards which were unrealistic and not implementable were uncritically maintained simply to comply with prevailing norms. The claims to validity and reliability of policy instruments were made on the basis that they were benchmarked on practices in other countries within the SADC region (NCHE 03). The rationalistic view of policy learning based on assumptions that the models 'work' or have worked elsewhere, informed the rationale that the QA standards and frameworks would be effective and implementable in Malawi claiming the contexts were broadly similar (MoEST 03).

The generality drawn was that policy production mainly involved adapting international, African continental and SADC regional QA models, standards and frameworks, which were translated, modified and otherwise altered in varying degrees and combined with existing national/local QA standards and practices in the Malawian higher education system. But in some instances, the technical-rationalistic view of policy learning based on 'what works' especially in other SADC countries superseded critical debate and interrogation of their ontology and philosophies. I concluded that rather than viewing national policymakers as simply recipient of global reforms models, the evidence acknowledged the active agency as reflected in selective policy learning and local adaptation.

7.3.4. Deconstructing the 'who' in production of QA standards and frameworks

There were substantial differences in terms of how NCHE engaged policy actors. Nine senior university managers particularly, two vice chancellors, one vice principal, three registrars, and three QA directors interviewed at three HEIs indicated that policy consultative meetings, validation and dissemination workshops held by NCHE actively engaged vice chancellors,

college principals, QA directors, university registrars, finance officers and librarians. This provided a forum for deliberating on the policy instruments, hence providing senior university managers with the opportunity to make their input and to buy into the national QA standards and procedures. Thus, senior university managers in all the three HEIs were generally receptive and believed there should be ownership of QA standards by HEIs because they were a product of a highly consultative policy process.

There were mixed views from academic unit managers. Two heads of department and two faculty deans from two HEIs admitted that NCHE mainly engaged deans and heads of departments from various universities to develop the 'template for programme curriculum development and course specification for higher education'. They further asserted that selected deans and heads of department were consulted in developing the 'higher education qualifications framework' although participation varied among institutions. At CS3-PubU the consultative meeting involved the vice principal and faculty deans only (CS3-PubU-Dean01) while at CS1-PvtU it involved senior management, deans and heads of department (CS1-PvtU-Dean02). However, six deans and three heads of department at the three HEIs claimed that they were not consulted when developing the Minimum Standards; Assessment Tools; and Accreditation Framework, the core instruments for the QA system. One of the responses was that:

> We were not involved in the development of minimum standards. I believe our input is necessary because we did not agree with some of their standards. A little consultation could have been necessary. We need a bottom-up approach in the way NCHE develops its instruments so that the standards should be agreed upon by a cross section of stakeholders (CS3-PubU-HoD).

This was echoed by nine academic unit managers at the three HEIs, who stated that they were only informed about minimum standards and the accreditation framework when NCHE officials visited institutions to brief them before commencing the process of accreditation. The general view among academic unit managers was that to say the voice of the academy was never heard, would be too strong a statement, simply because senior management represented the institutions. However, they felt some of the standards and aspects of the accreditation system were not in keeping with their expectations. The dissatisfaction with the outcome of the policy process, albeit the view that they did not input into the policy instruments manifested during implementation through subtle and critical resistance, suggesting there was little policy buy-in by academic unit managers. In brief, five deans and two officials at NCHE testified that

the visits by NCHE did not proceed in some institutions and were replete with tensions, due to failure by NCHE officials to engage in critical dialogue and clarify what some academic unit managers perceived were flaws in the design of the QA system.

About academic staff, the QA director at CS1-PvtU emphatically stated that "NCHE does not involve academic staff and students when developing their instruments. They only deal with the registrars, QA directors, deans, college principals and vice chancellors" (CS1-PvtU-QAD). Two officials at NCHE contended that policy consultative and validation meetings held by NCHE require engaging people with reasonable experience and expertise to make significant input that would improve the policy documents. They believed university administrators served this purpose. One further argued that college principals and vice chancellors were experienced academics. By engaging them in their capacity as senior university managers, there was a recognition that they would reasonably represent academic staff (NCHE 02). This position was heavily disputed by some academic unit managers and academic staff who believed they were "the people who teach and should have been contributing to what should be the minimum standards" (CS1-PvtU-HoD). Eleven academic staff (three lecturers, four senior lecturers, three associate professors and one professor) at the three HEIs testified that they were not involved in developing QA standards. Where few academic staff participated in policy development, they were only engaged for specific tasks based on their expertise. One associate professor stated:

> We are not consulted at all. NCHE does not consult foot soldiers on the ground. But they talk to top management. So, NCHE regularly consults with college principals and vice chancellors. We normally tend to see a top-down approach from NCHE (CS3-PubU-AssProf01).

Academic staff respondents felt that a top-down approach was generally used by NCHE in policy development. They believed the QA standards were generally developed by NCHE staff and consultants, but consultations were done with university management. The policy instruments were merely handed down to them to implement. This implied the approach used by NCHE was more bureaucratic and managerial than collegial. The dominant view among academic staff was that NCHE attempted to live up to the idea that it was a mandated body that must prescribe standards. This was attributed to the way NCHE was enacted in the NCHE Act, which some claimed does not emphasise collaboration. Academic staff believed that university management and NCHE were responsible for the national QA system and not them. There was

generally some resistance around NCHE QA instruments from academic staff, but good will and support from top management (CS1-PvtU-Lecturer-DC).

Several factors were cited for the alleged meagre participation of academic staff in policy development. But one of the most cited reasons was that although senior management and other staff represented HEIs in developing NCHE policy instruments, they did not seek views of academic staff within universities. When policy actors have been invited by NCHE to consultative workshops, the invitation did not include draft policy documents and other relevant documents they were going to deliberate. The documents were mostly shared during the meeting, which made those invited unable to seek input so that they present the voice of their constituents (NTWG02-QAM). On few occasions when draft documents prepared by NCHE were shared in advance, they were addressed to policy actors in their individual capacity and not institutional capacity. "If there were others that would float the idea to their colleagues and get their input, it was only out of their own personal initiative" (CS3-PubU-R). Further, draft policy documents addressed to institutions were usually sent on short notice, perhaps one or two weeks, which did not provide enough room to convene meetings for staff to scrutinise policy documents and make meaningful contributions. This was mainly because "when academic staff are sent policy documents through emails very few would read and give feedback" (CS2-PubU-R). There was emphasis on the general lack of communication when university management and members of staff have attended policy consultative meetings. "The culture of not communicating after attending meetings was a major problem in Malawi" (NCHE 03). When policy actors have represented universities in policy consultative meetings, they did not report back to members of staff and eventually, some academic staff tended to be unaware of the policy instruments being developed by NCHE.

Thus, there were substantial differences in terms of how NCHE engaged policy actors. Policy development mainly involved senior university management. Academic unit managers were consulted and/or engaged when developing selected policy instruments, but together with academic staff, they were not fully involved in NCHE policy processes. The result was the contradictory positions of policy actors, whose impact manifested during implementation. There were claims of highly consultative process having been followed in policy development and support for the QA system by senior university managers, yet academic unit managers felt some aspects of the QA system were not in keeping with their expectations, because they were

not consulted. Academic staff believed a top-down approach characterised NCHE policy processes and this contributed to their lack of ownership.

7.4. Conclusion

The development of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi mainly involved adapting international, African continental and SADC regional QA models, standards and frameworks, which were translated, modified and otherwise altered in varying degrees and combined with existing national/local QA standards, procedures and practices in the Malawian higher education system. Thus, rather than viewing national policymakers as simply recipient of global reforms the evidence acknowledged the active agency as reflected in selective policy learning and local adaptation. However, policy processes were characterized by 'de-politicization' (Jayasuriya, 2015) in which policymaking appeared to be the application of a set of technical rules rather than political decisions about allocating values. There were instances where the technical-rationalistic view of policy learning based on policy maker's assumptions of 'what works' in other SADC countries superseded critical interrogation and debate and that power rather than technical soundness of the QA system design, standards and frameworks led to policy settlement. The result was that several inconsistences and anomalies were not resolved during policy development, which contributed to contestations about the regulatory role of NCHE and implementation of the QA system.

Policy production mainly used the consultative approach and expert consultancy approach but in general, the inclusiveness of policy processes varied with instruments and in some cases, it was marginal and text production was the prerogative of experts. Policy processes were broadly controlled by the government through the MoEST and national QA agency – NCHE and mainly involved senior university managers, local experts, international consultants and other actors external to university. Academic unit managers and ordinary academic staff were particularly not fully involved and felt the development of the QA system instruments was characterised by a top-down approach, hence lacked ownership. This echoed Luckett (2007b) that national QA systems mooted and driven by government policy elites, QA agencies and university management are generally regarded as managerial and bureaucratic and lack ownership of academic staff. The "lack of policy ownership by academic staff has serious implications in terms of policy implementation" (Mhlanga, 2008, p. 301).

Chapter Eight

'NCHE hits the ground': Implementation of the national quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi.

8.0. Introduction

This chapter provides findings for the third research question which sought to understand how the national QA system regulated by NCHE operates to assure quality of higher education in Malawi. Based on the modified trajectory framework 'context of practice', the results integrated key structural features linked to implementation of national QA systems framed by Perellon (2001, 2007) and agential interpretation and enactment in practice emphasized by Ball (1994). The chapter was organized according to five main structural features linked to implementation: (1) national QA system design, (2) purposes, (3) QA control body, (4) functions, procedures and processes, and (5) public disclosure and use of QA information.

8.1. National QA system design: 'integrated system model'

QA system design for higher education require making difficult choices among competing views about 'quality' and different dimensions of QA (Skolnik, 2010). QA systems are normally set up at internal and external level resulting in internal QA (IQA) and external QA (EQA) systems. The former is ontologically driven towards improving HEIs, while the latter is associated with regulatory control, compliance and making HEIs accountable (Westerheijden et al., 2014). The difficulty of attaining the right balance between the two was discussed in chapter three. The *higher education QA framework for Malawi* (NCHE 2019) explicated the understanding of QA and design of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi. QA was formally conceived as

> "An all-embracing term for the continuous process aimed to keep the set standards of quality of the higher education system, institutions and programmes. This involved all planned and systematic actions that have been put in place (policies, procedures, processes, mechanisms and approaches) necessary to provide adequate confidence that quality is being maintained and enhanced" (NCHE, 2019, p. 29).

The national QA system adopted an 'integrated system model' which aimed to hold together internal and external QA mechanisms and sustain the tension between accountability versus improvement functions of QA and the 'bureaucratic/managerial' versus 'collegial/facilitative' rationality (see chapter three). The narrative in the NCHE document was that:

> "Although internal QA and external QA seems to have different purposes and philosophies, many aspects are intertwined. Internal and external QA should not be

> seen as opposite or conflicting approaches but rather as complementary. The Malawi QA system is designed to ensure a seamless and harmonised system that align internal QA and external QA mechanisms. The rationale for the alignment is to increase the overall effectiveness of the national QA system" (NCHE, 2019 p. 33).

A critical analysis of data suggested that the depth of conceptual understanding and politics of competing dimensions of QA were largely taken for granted. The tension between the two dimensions was trivialised. The QA system design was simply presented in NCHE documents as an indisputable fact with wide use of modal verbs 'shall', 'should' and 'must' signifying stakeholders be under obligation to accept 'truth' claims about the QA system at taken for granted face value, which worked to appropriate politics through technical rationality and functionality. This was buttressed by the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 implying HEIs must by law comply. Yet scholars have shown that the traditional legitimacy of the EQA system linked to the legal mandate was insufficient to guarantee support (Stensaker 2018).

Michaela Martin & Stella (2007) argued that when operationalising the national QA system, it is not merely a question of setting the QA standards and criteria. The QA agency need to precisely determine its understanding of 'quality' and how to legitimise and make the definitions acceptable throughout the higher education system. Acknowledging that it is highly problematic to define 'quality' precisely and recognizing that 'quality' is multifaceted, Maniku (2008) contended that working definitions of quality appeared to be essential for a QA system to achieve a degree of success. However, most of the deans of faculty, heads of departments and academic staff interviewed in this study reported that they were unaware of any specific formal definition of quality in the context of the national QA system. There was very little critical reflection and deliberation among policy actors about the working notions or definitions of quality. One NCHE technical working group member attested that: "we did not really sit down to say let's analyse or compare the different ways of defining quality" (NTWG 01-Dean). The QA system was rolled out in 2016 without formal explicit definitions of quality until in 2019 when NCHE published the: *Higher education QA framework for Malawi* (NCHE, 2019b) developed by an international consultant, which conveyed its understanding of quality. The document claimed that:

> "NCHE's conception of quality has been based on the concepts advanced in literature that are widely used in QA internationally but adapted to Malawi context. Harvey and Green (1993) identified five different conceptions of educational quality which still endure: quality as exceptional, quality as perfection, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformation. The

NCHE's concept of quality was informed by three of these: fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation" (NCHE, 2019b, p. 30)

As a result, there was both convergence and disjuncture between 'formal' definitions of quality explicit in NCHE policy documents and how NCHE official themselves and actors from HIEs described the meaning of quality based on how the national QA system operated or what Newton (2010) termed 'situated' meanings held by policy actors in practice. The disjuncture implied the shared understanding of quality was missing. It was a case of people operating within the same QA system but pulling in different directions.

For ten respondents, the idea of quality in the context of the national QA system was about *meeting standards and criteria* set by NCHE and those put in place by universities themselves and professional agencies. One NCHE official shared this view that: "for NCHE, quality is understood in the context of the minimum standards that institutions should comply with and achieve" (NCHE 03). Similarly, one vice chancellor stressed that: "NCHE talks about minimum standards when they think about quality. It is believed that if institutions meet the minimum standards, quality is taken care of" (CS1-PvtU-VC). Some NCHE documents claimed that standards were designed to encourage institutions to continually strive towards excellence (NCHE, 2013b, 2015c). The assumption was that certain minimum standards must be demanded from HEIs, and they must be held accountable for them to ensure quality of education provision. But "excellence should come in when institutions talk about quality. The institutions should aim to go further than what the minimum standards prescribe" (MoEST 03). Yet in practice respondents claimed 'minimum standards' was a misnomer. They were ideal standards, "maximum standards" that universities could only aspire to meet (CS3-PubU-P).

The other notion of quality embraced by the national QA system was *fitness for purpose*. Harvey & Green (1993) defined fitness for purpose as the extent the product or services offered by HEIs meet the stated purpose and whether the purpose is acceptable and aligned to broad national goals and stakeholder expectations. One official at NCHE claimed that: "quality is well defined and people know that it is fitness for purpose" (NCHE 01). NCHE focuses on how well an institution conducts its functions determined by the outcomes of that institution. Whereas most deans, heads of departments and academic staff shared Harvey and Green (1993) view that quality ought to be understood as 'transformation' in terms of change and adding

value to individual students, NCHE extrapolated the term to mean transformation of an institution. In this regard:

> "NCHE viewed a quality institution as the one that transforms itself in such a way that it develops an identity, role and purpose that is fully appropriate to the Malawi context and adds value to the learning of individuals. Furthermore, a quality institution would itself be empowered through taking responsibility for the kind of education it offers, become self-aware of its goals and purpose and monitor its own quality" (NCHE, 2019. p. 30).

This implied the QA system was designed to deal with institutional differences in ways that both enhance quality and protect individual institution's identity, philosophy and practice. This aligned with the philosophy of the fitness for purpose approach, which assumes that institutions and programmes cannot be judged against strictly uniform standards, since they may have different missions and serve specific clientele groups (Martin & Stella, 2007). Yet in practice NCHE applied uniform standards and quantifiable criteria to all institutional types, which did not allow for diversity. This showed that there was a disjuncture between the NCHE's formal understanding of quality and how it operated in practice.

NCHE documents stressed the obligation for "HEIs to demonstrate their relevance and accountability for the investment of public and private money" (NCHE, 2013a, p. 5) indicating that the QA system further embraced '*quality as value for money'*. NCHE related value for money to the efficiency and effectiveness of an institutions' functioning. The belief was that elements of the QA standards need to ensure that an institution of higher learning has governance and management structures needed to manage its resources and activities effectively and efficiently with the focus on quality of outcomes being achieved (NCHE, 2019).

Thus, despite the lack of consistent formal definitions, it was possible to identify that quality was understood as: meeting and surpassing (excellence) standards; fitness for purpose; value for money; and transformation within an overarching standards-based framework. However, NCHE focus on 'quality as transformation of the institution' rather than the 'learner' or micro-level practices of teaching and learning implied the QA system was more bureaucratic and managerial, putting university management at the centre and academic staff in the peripheral. I would argue that this was unlikely to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

8.2. Purposes of the national QA system

Martin (2018) asserted that an examination of the purposes of QA can help to understand how national QA systems operate, since different emphasises are given to various purposes of QA in different countries. The national QA system for higher education in Malawi emphasised four broad purposes posited by Harvey & Newton (2004): accountability; regulation and control; compliance; and improvement/enhancement.

8.2.1. Accountability

The national QA system primarily aimed to ensure accountability of HEIs to government and society. NCHE (2013) stated the basic principle of the Malawi QA system was that "HEIs should demonstrate their relevance and accountability for the investment of public and private money" (p. 5). This was interpreted in two ways. Firstly, that there should be accountability in terms of the use of resources by HEIs (MoEST 01). Secondly, that universities should be accountable to the public in delivering on their mandate to conduct research aligned to the country's development challenges and produce graduates that meet the needs of the industry in order to support the country's socio-economic development (NCHE 03). "Public accountability" by way of generation of public information for prospective students, employers and the community, that they know the quality of institutions, programmes and the qualifications they award was built into the NCHE quality standards (NCHE, 2015, p. 19).

8.2.2. Regulation and control

The other dominant purpose of the national QA system in Malawi was regulation and control. Harvey (2007) asserted that "regulatory control is about ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, by making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of criteria of adequacy" (p.3). He further pointed out that control is often exercised due to the perceived need to ensure the status, standing and legitimacy of higher education (Harvey, 2007). The national QA system in Malawi was mandatory, implying that it was compulsory for HEIs to adhere to the NCHE QA procedures and mechanisms. Chapter six stated that this was primarily intended to regulate and control the rapid market-led expansion of private universities and cross-border higher education. The Minister stressed during the enactment of the NCHE Act in Parliament that

> "For the first time we are going to set up a system of regulation and control. The same way that Malawi Bureau of Standards sets standards to protect consumers, the purpose of this is to protect our students" (Malawi Parliament, 2011, p. 996).

The Ministers' use of the metaphor "Malawi Bureau of Standards"; an agency that 'sanctions' or 'closes down' industries that produce or sell sub-standard products to consumers in Malawi, meant that once NCHE prevent entry (registration) and closes 'sub-standard' institutions and programmes (accreditation), the ones allowed to operate would be considered to provide quality education (quality control). Section 19 (1) of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 made it clear that it was illegal for any private HEI to operate without prior approval and registration with NCHE and that one could be fined or sentenced to 14 years imprisonment for violating the law. In addition, where the operations of whether a public or private HEI are judged to be far below standards; and that an institution does not carry out its functions properly; or is in breach of its charter or terms of enactment under which it was established, the NCHE had powers to advise the Minister to close the institution.

8.2.3. Compliance

Compliance often linked to control was the other broad purpose of the national QA system in Malawi. Basically "compliance is about ensuring that institutions adopt procedures, practices and policies that are considered by the government and other stakeholders to be desirable for the proper conduct of the higher education sector and to ensuring its quality" (Harvey 2007). HEIs in Malawi were required to comply with and meet the minimum standards for higher education set by NCHE to be registered and accredited. NCHE (2015b) pointed out that the compliance aspect of the national QA and regulatory system was specifically designed to safeguard quality of higher education provision and ensure the comparability of standards, procedures and qualifications within and between HEIs in Malawi. This extended to SADC regional and international comparison to ensure student and labour mobility and global competitiveness of Malawian institutions and the higher education system. Professional regulatory bodies also demanded compliance to ensure that professional programme offered by universities in Malawi adhered to standards of professional practice.

8.2.4. Improvement/Enhancement

The further dominant goal of the national QA system in Malawi was to support and encourage HEIs to create, institutionalize and sustain a culture of quality and continuous quality improvement. Beerkens (2015) and Harvey & Newton (2004) stated that improvement function of QA is more about encouraging institutions to reflect upon their practices and enable adjustment and change that further develop the delivery of quality education. NCHE (2015b) posited both standards for QA and various quality enhancement practices and explicitly stated

that NCHE was "committed to 'quality assurance' and 'quality enhancement' of higher education in Malawi" (p. 6-7). Improvement was considered as other regulated activities linked to the accountability system. HEIs were required to self-assess against the minimum quality standards to primarily 'enlighten' NCHE, but also to help institutions develop the improvement plan. The important element of improvement built in the system was the institutional audits and monitoring follow-up visits undertaken after the evaluation, to ensure suggested improvements are put in place. The other element was the mandate for NCHE to facilitate establishment of internal QA systems for HEIs to take responsibility of QA and engage in self-regulation that enhances quality.

However, it would be shown that in practice, NCHE was unable to regularly carryout monitoring follow-up visits and had never conducted a comprehensive institutional audit. Also, notwithstanding NCHE directive, formal IQA systems were yet to be fully institutionalised in the studied universities. Thus, despite quality improvement being embedded in the design of the national QA system, the implementation of the system during the 'first phase' examined by the study appeared to be about regulatory control, compliance and accountability. This underscored the complex nature of the internal and external dichotomy of the QA system discussed in literature (Westerheijden et al., 2014).

8.3. National QA control body: NCHE

The NCHE was the central body responsible for promotion, regulation and coordination of higher education and QA in Malawi. Although there were various other professional regulatory bodies such as the Nurses and Midwife Council of Malawi that played a role by accrediting professional study programmes, professional regulation was but preliminary to NCHE processes. Most respondents indicated that where accreditation of a programme by a professional body is required the NCHE would not accredit the programme unless it has first been accredited by the professional body.

8.3.1. Governance structures

NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 (Sections 3-14) stipulated the organizational structure for NCHE conceived at policy level to be semi-autonomous. NCHE relied on government funding, international donors and income generated through fees and levies and was accountable to the Ministry of Education on technical matters and Department of Statutory Corporation in the Office of President and Cabinet on human resources issues. The governance of NCHE

comprised the policy body (the Council) and management (the Secretariat). The Council consisted of six independent members appointed by the Minister, based on their high professional standing, knowledge and expertise in higher education; and seven 'ex-officio' or members appointed in their official capacity. These included two vice chancellors that represented public universities; one vice chancellor to represent private universities; the Secretary for Education; Secretary to Treasury; and Controller for Department of Statutory Corporation (DSC) and Secretary for Department of Human Resource Management and Development (DHRMD) in the Office of President and Cabinet (OPC). The NCHE Act established two committees and provided room for creation of more committees to support the Council in carrying out its operations and thereby make recommendations to the Council for considerations. At the time of this study, the Council operated with three committees: the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAAC); Finance, Administration and Appointment (FAAC); and Audit and Risk Management (ARMC) committees. The Secretariat comprised two main departments namely Quality Assurance and Accreditation; and Corporate Services, which operated under the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and policy direction of the Council as the management wing, that coordinates all regulatory and QA activities and provide the Council with information for its deliberation and decisions.

8.3.2. Independence of NCHE

Most scholar have argued that the independence of the QA agency irrespective of affiliation, with respect to QA processes and decisions is necessary to function effectively and protect its legitimacy (Michaela Martin & Stella, 2007; Materu, 2007). However, Zavale, et al., (2016) called for caution on the idea that national QA agencies should be fully autonomous bodies with broad independence from government in the African context where QA agencies often depend on government funding. These authors argued that government dependency and support in the context of Africa may be less harmful and even necessary to the existence, survival and sustainability of the national QA system. Tao (2013) argued that in the UK where the QA agency described itself as independent of the UK government because it was funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges and through contracts with higher education funding bodies, the independent status was still questioned.

In this study, although NCHE was at policy level semi-autonomous, the extent to which it was in practice operationally autonomous was contested. Six respondents claimed the governance

of NCHE gave too much power to the Minister, who was actively involved in decision undertaking, which was believed to affect the regulation of the QA system. One stated.

> In the current set-up of NCHE, the minister has a lot of power. NCHE cannot stop a programme when it is not accredited. They would want to consult the minister. If NCHE was autonomous, it means NCHE through its governance system should do everything on their own and only report to the minister on what they did including the decisions they undertook and effected (NTWG 02-QAM).

Two others claimed that national regulatory bodies in Malawi, not just NCHE, because of political influence, it was "hard for them to be independent" (CS 1-PvtU-VC). The former Chairperson of NCHE Board (the Council) contended that by subjecting the composition of the Council to the Minister, it made the appointments susceptible to political interference:

> When I was Chair of NCHE, it was very unfortunate. I had two years remaining when my term was ended. To this day I did not receive any official notification from the government that I was no longer the chair. It was just published in the newspapers. Also, instead of the Council being appointed based only on merit in conjunction with NCHE's Act, they were selected politically. There is no independence of the Council from the politics of the government (NCHE 05).

On the other hand, two officials at NCHE explained that while political interference was possible when appointing the council, operationally, the national QA system by design provided checks and balances. NCHE was able to collect reliable data and make independent analyses that informed decision-making. The decisions were made at several different levels – "the level of external reviewers; the Secretariat; the Committees of the Council; the Council itself, and finally by the Minister". This decision-making staircase was understood to establish objectivity and reliability of QA processes and outcomes thereby assuring the credibility of the agency (NCHE 02). This suggested finding the right balance between NCHE operational autonomy and accountability to government remained problematic partly because the NCHE was more like a department of the MoEST and the Minister both appointed the Council and had the final say on the operational decisions of the Council.

8.3.3. Functions, procedures and processes

The NCHE was mandated to carryout various functions in regulating higher education and QA in Malawi, beyond those performed by a typical agency in more developed higher education systems. The functions outlined in section 15 of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 could be broadly summarised into six:

i. Developing minimum standards, criteria and procedures for QA and Accreditation

ii. Harmonization of selection of students to all public universities.
iii. Developing a national qualifications framework that is compatible with regional and international standards and recognition of qualifications.
iv. Facilitating establishment of institutional QA systems for higher education
v. Advising the government on the development of higher education
vi. Regulation of higher education and QA through registration and accreditation of institutions and programmes.

One respondent claimed that “the NCHE mandate was a case of NCHE biting too much than they are able to chew” (CS3-Pubu-AsProf02). Another one stated that “NCHE has crumbled on itself a lot of things” (CS3-PubU-SnrlLect). These metaphors were used to illustrate the multiplicity of NCHE functions, which most respondents believed affected the execution of its core mandate. The development of standards and criteria for QA was discussed in chapter seven. This section examined how selected key functions were carried out by NCHE and interpreted by actors in practice to among others demonstrate the implication of the policy development processes on implementation of the QA system. It would be shown that the sub-optimal policy settlement during the formation of NCHE discussed in chapter seven manifested through the agency of actors contesting and modifying policy at the level of practice.

8.3.3.1. Harmonization of selection of students in public universities

One main function of NCHE was to harmonise the selection of student to all public universities. Data showed that NCHE harmonised the selection of normal entry undergraduate students into public universities from the 2015-2016 academic year. What happens is that the NCHE calls for admission into the universities and all students who qualify submit their applications directly to NCHE. Then the NCHE consolidates and scrutinises all the applications and invites public universities to select candidates at the same time, and thereafter, NCHE officially announces names of successful candidates selected into various programmes of public universities. According to one KI at MoEST, “harmonisation of student selection coordinated by NCHE was part of the government initiative to ensure increased and equitable access to higher education” (MoEST 01). It was observed that when public universities recruited undergraduate students on their own using different processes according to the mandate given by the Acts of Parliament that establish them, “there were a lot of duplications” (NCHE 04). The same student could be selected to multiple universities, which limited the opportunity of

other eligible students to get selected to university, since the higher education system in Malawi did not have the capacity to enrol all students that qualify for admission (NTWG 01-Dean).

Although most interviewed respondents admitted that harmonization of selection of students by NCHE had eliminated the problem of duplications and created space for selection of slightly more students to university, the NCHE's role of coordinating selection of students was highly contested. Four respondents claimed that there was 'conflict of interest' with NCHE coordinating the selection of students to public universities. One professor stated that NCHE had created confusion for public universities where it would officially announce the selection of students into a programme but later not accredit the same programme (CS3-PubU-Prof). The others pointed out that the coordination of selection by NCHE had nothing to do with ensuring that quality of students admitted into universities was of acceptable standards. One vice chancellor contended that:

> "NCHE as a regulatory body should simply check with institutions if the selection process and admission criteria meet acceptable standards. By being part of the selection process NCHE was compromising its position" (CS-PubU-VC).

Two other respondents from public university and two KI at NCHE indicated that they did not have problems with the arrangement, because in practice "NCHE was not involved in the actual selection of students, but only coordinated the process" (CS3-PubU-Dean02). These respondents interpreted the contestation as a 'hang-over effect'. By this, one stated that because the Acts of Parliament that establish public universities mandated them to be responsible for student admission, the role of NCHE was misconstrued as usurping the mandate of HEIs. However, the two KI at NCHE admitted that "the issue of conflict of interest was raised by stakeholders", who noted that they "coordinate the selection of students to university, then go to universities to check their admission criteria" (NCHE 04). This further "created the public perception that NCHE might be biased towards public universities because it is not involved in the selection of student in private universities" (NCHE 02). The KI pointed out that most private institutions raised concerns that their exclusion from the 'NCHE harmonized selection system' exacerbated the perception that students joining private universities were "second class" or "second rated", and "the remainders", which undermined the confidence of employers in the graduates due to the stereotypical view that they were not initially 'worth the university material', otherwise they could have been selected by NCHE to public universities. Thus, four KIs at NCHE and one at Ministry of Education revealed that there were plans by the government to establish a separate entity "the Malawi Central Placement Board", drawing on

the practice in countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, to be mandated to conduct harmonized selection of students to both public and private universities (MoEST 01).

8.3.3.2. Developing a national qualifications framework and recognition of qualifications

The other mandated function of NCHE was "to develop the national qualifications framework that is compatible to regional and international standards". The framework was to harmonize the quality and standards of qualifications from similar programmes offered at the same level in different institutions in the country and ensure coherence with regard to curricula across institutions to promote intra-system student mobility (MoEST, 2008). At the same time, the government wanted that an education qualification obtained in Malawi should be equivalent and comparable to similar qualifications in SADC region, Africa and internationally to promote student and labour mobility (NCHE 04). The NCHE was tasked to use the qualifications framework to evaluate and validate qualifications obtained from different universities within Malawi and from other countries to ensure credibility of qualifications and deal with potential fraud (Malawi Parliament, 2011a).

Members of Parliament when enacting the NCHE Act had stated that requiring NCHE to develop and regulate the national qualifications framework was overstretching its mandate, given that it may not have the competency and expertise in other sectors of education, namely primary, secondary, and post-secondary technical and vocational education that would also be covered by the national qualifications framework. Two KI at NCHE revealed that when the NCHE 'hit the ground', there was a realisation that the NCHE Act included some functions, which though desirable, were not feasible for NCHE. One KI stated:

> What we have seen is that the NCHE Act may have included certain things but forgotten others, or maybe included a lot of things that NCHE is not supposed to do. So, we are working on the higher education overarching bill. In that one we have streamlined things that NCHE need to be doing (NCHE 04).

Another KI at NCHE pointed out that the NCHE mandate was mainly about the higher education sector. As such, along the way it was agreed that NCHE should focus on the higher education qualifications framework. The role of developing the national qualifications framework was taken up and coordinated by the Ministry of Education (NCHE 02). The Ministry of Education was also developing the Malawi Qualifications Authority (MAQA) bill that would establish a separate body to regulate the national qualifications framework and

validate qualifications. At the time of this study, the NCHE had finished developing the higher education qualification framework, which formed a sub-framework that would be integrated into the national qualification framework. However, there was evidence that since becoming operational the NCHE had "been validating higher education qualifications obtained from different institutions across the world to determine both equivalence and whether they are from accredited programmes and institutions" (NCHE 03).

8.3.3.3. Facilitating establishment of formal institutional QA systems in higher education

NCHE was further mandated "to help HEIs in Malawi to put in place formal internal QA systems". Martin (2018) noted that based on the widespread view that HEIs bear the main responsibility for the quality of their services, internal QA (IQA) systems have been established in HEIs in many countries. The development of IQA systems has mostly been a response to requirements of national QA bodies and external QA (EQA) processes but also to institutions own requirements for internal quality monitoring and management (Brennan, 2018). Formal IQA systems are believed to be the most effective way of managing and improving the quality of education that an institution provides and it is argued that formal IQA structures play an important role for HEIs to adopt the 'culture of quality' in all their activities (Stensaker, Brandt, & Solum, 2008).

Data showed that the NCHE developed detailed guidelines published in the *Higher Education QA Framework for Malawi* (NCHE, 2019b) document to assist HEIs in establishing the IQA system. The framework requires HEIs to have a formal QA structure; an approved QA policy for institution's activities at all levels spanning the corporate domain (e.g., governance, finance, human resources) and academic domain; the QA office or unit with specialised staff, headed by a senior personnel at the level of management; and the university coordinating committee all of which must be adequately resourced to be responsible for QA within the university and to work hand in hand with NCHE.

Martin (2018) observed the contradictory discourse, that although it is generally agreed that the primary responsibility of QA rest with individual HEIs, the mandate for external QA agency to prescribe IQA systems often result in compliance to regulations that could work against quality improvement. One respondent mentioned a public university that had resisted to establish the QA office, because they said, QA responsibilities were done by deans and heads

of department. But due to external pressure from NCHE, the university simply appointed one dean of faculty to also serve as the QA coordinator (NTWG01-QAD). This exposed the downside of 'compliance culture' where universities adopt visible but superficial IQA system mechanisms such as appointment of QA managers, when its impact on quality enhancement could be limited (Dill, 2018; Harvey, 2018). On the other hand, most respondents emphasized that IQA systems needed external support from NCHE, but not necessarily domination by NCHE. This was justified on the basis that HEIs in Malawi were at different stages in developing IQA systems noting that some HEIs had established QA offices while others were still in the planning phase and yet to formulate QA policies for that purpose. The dominant view was that with the growing global competition, the NCHE was needed to establish IQA benchmarks in line with regional and international guidelines and best practices to provide a common framework for developing, interpreting and harmonising IQA systems across HEIs in Malawi. The role of NCHE was interpreted in terms of capacity development and support for institutions (NTWG01-Dean). The QA director from a public university testified that "NCHE had taken upon itself to train all QA directors in higher education institutions" noting that most universities in Malawi "just picked somebody from their pool to be the QA director, without any formal training in QA" and that she had attended three such trainings (CS3-PubU-QAD).

To sum up, chapter seven indicated that Member of Parliament had raised the issue that the multiplicity of functions given to NCHE would create a challenge of capacity. However, the Minister instigated a policy settlement that did not allow amendments to the NCHE bill. The foregone discussion has shown that when NCHE 'hit the ground' policy actors from universities did not mutely accept the policy settlement of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011. Rather some functions of NCHE were contested and declared not feasible, triggering the process of drafting the new higher education bill to address the inconsistencies. This supported Ball (2017) and the trajectory framework of the study that "policies are contested, interpreted and 're-written' (enacted) in the arenas of practice and the rhetoric, texts and meaning of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practice" (p. 10).

8.3.4. Regulation of higher education and quality assurance

The core regulatory and QA function undertaken by NCHE was registration and accreditation of HEIs and programmes using prescribed standards and criteria. Chapter three discussed various approaches to QA. NCHE utilized three main QA procedures: (1) accreditation, (2) institutional audits, and (3) monitoring spot-checks and follow-up visits.

8.3.4.1. Accreditation

Accreditation in the context of Malawi is the processes by which NCHE evaluates HEIs and programmes to determine whether they comply with the minimum standards to be granted the accreditation status and certificate of accreditation (NCHE, 2019b). The accreditation model for Malawi comprised three main stages: (1) registration of institutions and programmes; (2) institutional accreditation; and (3) programme accreditation.

There were various contestations regarding this model. For example, one official at NCHE was of the view that institutional registration processes made institution accreditation redundant, noting that assessment processes were the same except that different tools were used (NCHE 01). Another respondent contended that:

> "Most countries accredit a programme not an institution. It is quite funny what is happening here. They say they want to accredit both institution and programmes. When a public institution is established by an Act of Parliament and private university is assessed and registered with NCHE that is enough. What should happen is to conduct institutional audits and only accredit their programmes" (NTWG -02 QAM).

However, the other official at NCHE defended the institutional accreditation, noting that all public and private universities that had undergone the accreditation process were accredited with conditions. This to him suggested being established by an Act of Parliament or assessed for registration was not a guarantee that an institution would have and/or maintain the requirements to provide quality education (NCHE 02). Hoosen, et al., (2018) observed that the model adopted in Malawi was also used in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique and Swaziland. However, for countries such as Mauritius, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Lesotho, once institutions are registered, they undertake institutional audits and only accredit programmes. The fundamental difference was mainly philosophical. The processes applied in institutional audits and institutional accreditation were similar, but in principle the former served to confirm the availability of mechanisms that guarantee standards and focused on quality enhancement, while the latter tended to have an accountability focus and made graded judgement about quality. In effect, institutional audits were deemed to have a major impact on promoting the quality culture (Woodhouse, 2013).

8.3.4.1.1. Registration process

The first phase in the accreditation model was the registration of institutions and programmes. This is the process whereby applicants seek legal authority from NCHE to establish a private

HEI and to offer an academic programme. Public HEIs are established by Acts of Parliament and only required to register their programmes. The registration process involved several steps. The institution is required to submit the application to NCHE using an application form **(Appendix X),** which indicates important information and required documentation to be provided, accompanied by application fees of one million Malawi kwacha (US$1,247.27). This include information that the institution is a legal entity (body corporate), its governance structure, affiliation whether it is a religious, for-profit or not-for-profit organization, the programmes that would be offered, mode of delivery, number of students to be enrolled in each programme and general criteria for student admission. The institution also provides details about student fees structure, infrastructure, equipment, and human and financial resources that would support programme delivery.

NCHE evaluates the suitability of the application for institution and programme registration and makes a preliminary visit to inspect the institution or where it would operate from and provide written feedback on what to work on before the actual assessment (NCHE 03). The institution writes the NCHE when ready and makes a payment for the actual cost of assessment invoiced by NCHE based on the number of programmes and an additional 20% of the total amount as administration fees. The technical panel of external reviewers is deployed by NCHE that assesses the institution and programmes and produces the external review report. The *assessment form for higher education institutions* (NCHE, 2015b) is used to rate the institution and programmes against the minimum quality standards on a three-point scale: unacceptable = 0; acceptable with conditions = 1; and acceptable = 2, with spaces provided for comments.

The decision to register or not, is made by the Council and approved by the Minister based on the external panel assessment report. The institution or programme is duly registered if it has the aggregate minimum score of 50% and above on each standard and the maximum score of 2 on specific areas deemed critical for provision of quality education. The NCHE may grant an institution a provisional registration status in order to work on the conditions that might have been identified during the assessment for the purpose of gaining a final registration. The provisional registration certificate is valid for one year from the date of issue and allows to publicise the institution and programmes expected to be offered at the institution. The only prohibition is that the institution cannot admit students. The institution and programme that are duly and fully registered are allowed to enrol students, even if they are not accredited but after eighteen months they are required to apply for accreditation. Two deans of faculty at CS3-

PubU and a lecturer and vice chancellor at CS1-PvtU observed that this created a problem where some duly registered institutions and programmes would eventually fail accreditation and consequently graduate students from unaccredited programmes. The respondents faulted NCHE's 'developmental approach', where even though universities are discredited, they were not closed immediately, but left to continue operating with the hope that they would eventually improve. Universities were forced to close only if they are de-registered or denied initial registration. However, in other countries HEIs and programmes would only operate and enrol students after being duly and fully registered and accredited (Kohoutek, 2009).

8.3.4.1.2. Accreditation process

Accreditation of institutions and programmes was the second phase undertaken after the institution has been registered with NCHE. This was valid for one academic cycle, normally a period of five years and upon the lapse of that period, HEIs were required to apply again for accreditation. NCHE's accreditation and evaluation framework indicated that HEIs accreditation involves an assessment of the physical, human, financial, teaching and learning resources, management and operational procedures and the environment against an acceptable standard of academic life. Programme accreditation evaluates the academic qualifications of staff employed by the institution during the period of assessment, the total number of students enrolled, ICT infrastructure, and provision of training, the library and other teaching and learning resources, the institution's financial resources, physical facilities, student-teacher ratio, and the curriculum (NCHE, 2015a). However, the processes for institutional and programme accreditation were basically the same and similar to those followed in other countries (Harvey, 2004). These included: application for accreditation; self-assessment; external review and report; Council decision and approval by the Minister.

8.3.4.1.2.1. Application for accreditation

As with registration process, the university applies to NCHE for accreditation of their programmes and institution using a prescribed form (**Appendix XI**) accompanied by relevant documentation and pays the application fee of one million Malawi kwacha (US$1,247.27) and actual total cost of hiring external reviewers invoiced by NCHE based on the number of programmes, plus 20% of the total cost as administration fees.

8.3.4.1.2.2. Self-assessment

The institution undertakes self-assessment on how they meet the minimum quality standards set by NCHE and submit the self-evaluation report to NCHE. The self-evaluation report is designed to inform the external review by NCHE, but also provide HEIs with the learning opportunity for discovering quality. One fundamental issue about self-assessment relates to whether HEIs can carry out analytical and self-critical assessment when the process may lead to sanctions or approval of programme or the institution (Martin & Stella, 2007). Interviews at the three case institutions revealed that the way self-evaluation was conducted and the extent it was truly critical varied by institution. In general, it appeared the national QA system was not able to ensure that HEIs conduct a high quality genuine self-assessment and not a formal self-assessment undertaken just to comply with requirement set by NCHE. Although the three institutions had a committee led by the QA director that coordinated the self-evaluation, the evidence suggested that the process was very systematic and self-critical at CS3-PubU than at the other two institutions. At CS3-PubU the institution developed a comprehensive questionnaire covering all aspects of the institution drawing on the institutional standards and NCHE standards, which was used to conduct self-evaluation. There was a realisation that "by just using the NCHE instruments the institution could miss out on some of the things the institution deems important but are not covered in the NCHE instruments" (CS3-PubU-Dean01). Respondents disclosed that they had failed themselves because the feeling was that they were not yet there. One stated:

> "When we met after we had aggregated the self-assessment results, we failed ourselves. The systems, processes and resources were not up to the standard that staff members wanted. The staff were very open. They were critical and honest in terms of what is expected and not necessarily hiding behind the fact that this is a government institution" (CS3-PubU-QAD).

At CS2-PubU, respondents indicated that they only used NCHE standards and accreditation framework to conduct self-evaluation (CS2-PubU-QAD). Although the QA director claimed the process involved critical reflection and that the self-evaluation report was a true reflection of the institution, some respondents observed that "when the self-assessment was taking place, it was more like the college was doing it because NCHE wanted it" (CS2-PubU-Lect). Another respondent explained that "there wasn't much critical reflection and introspection about the whole process". The respondent believed that "the process was not critical, though it was an internal assessment because it had the connotation that it would inform an external body" (CS2-PubU-Dean). Similarly, at CS1-PvtU respondents indicated that being the first HEI to undergo

the NCHE accreditation processes in Malawi, there was very little guidance from NCHE on how to conduct self-evaluation. The QA director stated that when NCHE informed the institution to do self-evaluation, "nobody knew what this was all about and how it should be done". As such, the process was neither systematic nor self-critical (CS1-PvtU-QAD).

Two KIs at NCHE confirmed that during the first cycle of accreditation "most institutions could not conduct critical and honest self-evaluation" (NCHE 02). There was a huge disjuncture between what institutions indicated in self-evaluation reports and what external reviewers observed in practice. Also, although NCHE provided the template for the self-evaluation report, the reports submitted by some institutions were not comprehensive and they could find a lot of information gaps. The two KIs attributed this to firstly, "the lack of appreciation by some HEIs of the value of self-evaluation" (NCHE 02). Secondly, the lack of capacity to conduct self-evaluation. Thirdly, it was believed "some institutions have the capacity, but if they do the critical and honest assessment, they were afraid, that maybe it might affect their chances to be accredited. So, they could hide the weaknesses" (NCHE 03). Nevertheless, most respondents at the three HEIs admitted that self-evaluation assisted them to identify their own shortcomings and plan for improvement. There were bold declarations like "self-evaluation was something that must be done without waiting for NCHE to be very truthful, because it is a very important exercise for improving quality" (CS3-PubU-Dean01). The trend was that after undertaking self-evaluation, institutions addressed some shortfalls and re-wrote the self-evaluation report that was submitted to NCHE.

8.3.4.1.2.3. External panel review and report

When an institution has submitted the self-evaluation report and supporting documents what followed was the external review. According to KIs at NCHE, the NCHE uses a 'peer review system' (NCHE 04). A team of expert reviewers drawn from HEIs within Malawi is constituted by NCHE to assess the institution and programmes. This comprises those with knowledge and substantial experience in higher education management and experts in particular academic disciplines. In some cases, the expert review team is broadened beyond academic membership to include specialists or professionals for programmes that must meet requirements from professional bodies. In addition, foreign experts are included, particularly where "it is difficult to find local reviewers and for the purposes of bringing the international experience so that programmes should be recognized nationally and internationally" (NCHE 02). When local reviewers have been appointed, they are trained by NCHE, while international reviewers are

only briefed and that to ensure independence, confidentiality and eliminate the conflict of interest, the review team signs the declaration of code of conduct (NCHE 01).

The review team analyses the self-evaluation reports and makes an institutional visit to verify and evaluate the institution's submission. Similar, experiences were shared by respondents from the three HEIs on how the process was done at their respective institutions. Respondents indicated that during the visit, the review team conducts a pre-assessment briefing in which the institutions is asked to make an oral presentation of their self-assessment report. Then the expert team examines the supporting documents, inspects the physical facilities and interviews staff and students. The evaluation form for accreditation is used by reviewers to determine whether the institution and programmes have met the minimum quality standard by rating on a five-point scale of: 0 = poor, 1 = insufficient, 2 = satisfactory, 3= good and 4 = excellent. In addition, reviewers describe the identified strengths, weaknesses and recommendations on each standard, which are shared with the institution during the post-assessment briefing before external reviewers leave the institution.

The expert review team produces the review report according to the format provided by the Council which is submitted to NCHE. Respondents indicated that initially NCHE could not share the reviewers report with institutions to enable the identification and correction of factual errors before the accreditation decision. But from 2018, before the report can be considered by the Council, it is sent to the institution to verify that the facts are correct and that it was a true reflection of what was assessed. However, there was evidence that when institutions have identified irregularities, the final report did not reflect the changes (CS3-PubU-R). Also in some cases, what institutions claimed to be factual errors was their alternative interpretation of facts in trying to justify why certain things were that way simply to avoid being penalised (NCHE 02).

8.3.4.1.2.4. Decision and approval by Minister

The expert review report is presented by NCHE secretariat to the QA and accreditation committee (QAAC), which scrutinizes the report and makes recommendations. The accreditation decision is made by the Council based on the expert review report and recommendations by the QAAC and approved by the Minister. The institution or programme is denied accreditation on the grounds of not meeting the standards and having serious shortfalls when the overall rating is 1-1.99 (poor and insufficient); accredited provisionally or

with conditions when rated 2-2.99 (satisfactory and mostly good); and dully accredited when all assessment areas are rated 3-4 (good and excellent). Where provisional accreditation is granted, the institution or programme is required to rectify the deficiencies within the time period not exceeding half the programme cycle to enable NCHE to conduct another accreditation before the first cohort of students complete the programme.

8.3.4.2. Institutional Audits

NCHE conducts institutional audits during the period between the initial accreditation and the next round of re-accreditation (NCHE 02). The stated principle was that for an institution to continue enjoying the accredited status, it must show continuous voluntary compliance to standards, strive for continuous quality enhancement and therefore must be involved in self-regulation (NCHE, 2013b, 2019b). NCHE's processes of institutional audits were similar to those applied in accreditation. This involved an exhaustive critical appraisal of the institution QA mechanisms, processes and procedures against the NCHE's audit criteria, that produces an institutional portfolio. An independent audit panel comprising experts drawn from HEIs in Malawi and other countries, appointed by NCHE, reviews the institutional portfolio and verifies through documentation, site visits and interviews, then prepares and submits an audit panel report. The only point of departure was that similar to practice elsewhere (Skolnik, 2010; Bjørn Stensaker, 2011) institutional audit did not make a 'pass' or 'fail' decision or judgement about quality of an institution or programme. NCHE (2019) stressed that the "focus of the NCHE's institutional audit system is on quality improvement" (p. 27). The outcomes of an institutional audit are formulated as commendations and recommendations to the institution concerned to build the capacity of HEIs and improve the quality of their programmes and student learning.

However, in practice three KIs at NCHE disclosed that the NCHE had never conducted what they termed 'comprehensive' institutional audits, except for staff audits and financial audits pertaining to the sustainability of selected institutions, following complaints from the public. Respondents indicated that this was the case because, unlike the institutional and programme registration and accreditation where the costs are paid for by HEIs themselves, "for institutional audits, the cost is supposed to be covered by NCHE. But NCHE mostly faces financial challenges to conduct the institutional audits" (NCHE 03). In addition, the NCHE did not have "the national institutional audit framework and criteria apart from the minimum standards and criteria for accreditation" (NTWG-02-QAM).

8.3.4.3. Monitoring Spot-checks and follow-up visits.

Interviews revealed that in line with its regulatory role, the NCHE regulates and monitors HEIs through spot-checks and follow-up visits. Four KIs at NCHE and two at Ministry of Education stated that when an institution or programme has been provisionally accredited or accredited with conditions, the institution is required to develop an improvement plan on how the outstanding deficiencies and recommendations from the external review report would be addressed, which is submitted to NCHE. The team from NCHE conducts follow up visits to institutions to ascertain whether the improvement plan is really being implemented and "to verify if the institution has improved" (MoEST 03). The follow-up visits are aimed at ensuring both compliance with standards and quality improvement. If the institution does not implement the improvement plan or the implementation is not satisfactory, the NCHE is mandated to conduct another assessment for accreditation. If after re-assessment, the shortfalls persist, the institution or programme accreditation status is revoked (NCHE 03).

The NCHE also conducts "unannounced visits" called spot checks (NCHE 01). The spot checks primarily aim to ascertain whether the institution and programme maintains the standards for registration and accreditation as one respondent stated:

> NCHE does spot checks. If they find that you have degenerated, from the time you were assessed, they can even withdraw the accreditation. So, this helps us to always be cognizant that NCHE can come anytime so we must make sure that whatever we achieved in terms of quality, we must maintain it (CS2-PubU-R).

Two KI at NCHE and one at Ministry of Education further explained that spot checks are often conducted without giving notice to the institution in order to detect dishonest institutions. The KI at Ministry of Education used the term 'staging' to elucidate that some institutions at times borrow equipment to deceive external viewers that they have the required resources to provide quality education simply to be registered or accredited. But after a few days the equipment is returned to the owners. As such, "NCHE from time to time conducts spot checking" (MoEST 01).

There were mixed views from respondents at the case institutions on whether NCHE has conducted spot checks and follow-up visits to their institutions after accreditation. Two senior university managers at CS1-PvtU confirmed that NCHE has made a follow-up visit "to check the progress on implementation of the improvement plan" (CS1-PvtU-QAD). On the contrary three respondents at CS2-PubU (QA director and two senior lecturers) and four at CS3-PubU

(QA director, Dean of faculty, and two senior lecturers) stated that despite most of their programmes being accredited with conditions, the NCHE did not follow-up the institutions but only requested for annual reports. The general observation was that “once accreditation decisions are made, there was hardly any follow-up by NCHE to check whether institutions are continuously complying with standards and implementing the recommendations” (CS3-PubU-SenrLect-DC). Two KI at NCHE and two at Ministry of Education conceded that NCHE was greatly overwhelmed due to limited human resources capacity. Since external reviewer panels needed to be accompanied by NCHE secretariat, the agency staff had to “always cope with overwhelming cycles of assessment with rapidly increasing numbers of private universities seeking either registration or accreditation” (NCHE 01). This made NCHE unable to regularly carry out other functions such as follow-up monitoring visits after accreditation, but mostly relied on annual reports from HEIs. This showed that during the ‘first phase’ examined by this study, the implementation of the national QA system procedure predominantly focused on regulatory control, accountability and compliance. The improvement rhetoric, though explicit in policy documents was hardly evident in practice. This was apparent in the inability of NCHE to significantly move beyond the registration and accreditation processes as observed by respondents.

8.4. Use of QA results or Information

Three sub-themes emerged from the data regarding the use of QA results: public disclosure of information; linking results of QA to institutional funding; and use of result to rank universities.

8.4.1. Public disclosure of information.

Public disclosure of the outcome is the common element in all QA mechanisms, although the extent of public disclosure of QA information can vary among countries from disclosure of only the outcome of accreditation to full public disclosure of the outcome, self-assessment reports and expert teams’ final reports (Martin & Stella 2007). Kohoutek (2009) reported the common practice in Europe that the accreditation status of HEIs and programmes is published on the website of the national QA agency and the self-Assessment reports and external review reports are freely available to the public to increase public awareness and enhance the culture of transparency. In Malawi, despite transparency being one core value of NCHE, public disclosure of QA information was limited to the registration and accreditation status of the institution and programmes. The NCHE could not make self-assessment reports and external

review reports of universities available to the public due to resistance from universities. This was revealed by the NCHE official when I had asked for documents:

> "You asked for documents. I said we can provide some but not others. In our current set up I cannot take the self-assessment report and the external review reports for a university to give you. I do not think we have reached that level. We cannot even put those reports on our website for the public to access, yet it is something that should be done. To do that, we may create or have a kind of resistance that you cannot even understand" (NCHE 02).

Similarly, some respondents at CS3-PubU indicated that ordinary academic staff could not access the external review report for their institution from NCHE, but only extracts on academic programmes where they were requested by management to address the shortfalls. One dean explained that "deans and heads of department were instructed by senior management not to print and share the external review report to their staff" (CS3-PubU-Dean02). This appeared to militate against NCHE's vision of developing "a culture of quality and excellence in higher education in Malawi" since a 'culture of quality' requires that everybody within the university must be responsible for quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). This partly requires both internal and external stakeholders to have full access to QA information about the institution. However, NCHE periodically published QA information about the registration and accreditation status of HEIs and programmes on its website and through press releases in the print media. The press releases also advised prospective students and parents to seek information from NCHE on the registration and accreditation status of institutions and their programme before applying for admission. The 'risk communication' strategy was used in the event where an institution is operating illegally or advertises a non-accredited programme to warn the public against the risk of attending such an institution or enrolling in the programme. This provided prospective applicants and the general public with information to enable them to make informed decisions so that they do not fall victims of poor education providers.

8.4.2. Linking results of QA to institutional funding

The practice in some other countries is that QA information is used to incentivise improved institutional performance by linking public funding decisions to the results from quality assessment (Jongbloed, 2010; Teferra, 2013). Whatever pros and cons of linking the results of QA to funding (see Kis, 2005, pp 22-23), some scholars argue that this represent an effective steering mechanism for promoting institutional change (Zavale et al., 2016). The study found that although the Malawi government policy direction was to adopt formula-based funding that integrate financial incentives and performance, NCHE documents were not explicit on the

linkage between the QA system results and public funding. Two KI at NCHE stated that public universities "still get funding in form of subvention from government and this was not linked to quality assessment and accreditation" (NCHE 01). However, the student loan system and research grants and projects funded by international agencies were linked to the national QA system results, although this perhaps did not have an impact on continuing QA process in all institutions. The Higher Education Student Loans and Grants Board (HESLB), established by government in 2015 provided student grants and loans to only those that are enrolled in accredited institutions and programmes. One KI citing the World Bank funded, 'African Higher Education Centres of Excellence (ACE) project' at two public universities in Malawi, indicated that international organization require that "for institution and programme to be funded, they should be accredited. This compels public universities to seek accreditation from NCHE" (NCHE 03).

8.4.3. Use of QA results to rank universities.

The other use of QA information that emerged from the data was university ranking. One KI at NCHE stated that "There have been pleas from stakeholders that NCHE should be ranking universities" (NCHE 03). However, NCHE had not started ranking. There was an observation that the issue of ranking did not come out clearly in the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 (NCHE 01). The KIs also indicated that NCHE was in infancy and needed to have confidence from all stakeholders and that "with the political climate for HEIs in Malawi, university ranking could be a recipe for confrontation and disagreement that could undermine the core mandate of NCHE" (NCHE 03). The literature indicated that although university ranking has grown considerably at both national and global level, programme and institution ranking by national QA agencies was an emerging practice (Bergseth, et al., 2014). The National Commission of Universities in Nigeria was the only QA agency in Africa that conducted ranking as part of the accreditation process since its establishment, although this had been contentious (Shabani, et al., 2014). The common criticism globally is that even the 'best' ranking systems are arbitrary in many aspects in terms of the selection and weighting given to different indicators (Kehm & Stensaker, 2009). However, despite the methodological problems, there is growing acceptance that rankings can and do serve an important role, either by spurring institutions to improve quality of low-ranked programmes, or helping students and parents in their decision about choice of university, and the government, funding agencies and employers to make judgements on decisions about funding, and graduate employee recruitment (Bell & Brooks, 2018).

8.5. Conclusion

The study has shown that NCHE was the overall national QA agency responsible for regulating higher education and QA in Malawi. When NCHE 'hit the ground' policy actors from universities did not mutely accept the policy settlement of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011. Rather some functions of NCHE were contested thereby triggering the process of drafting the new higher education bill to address inconsistencies. This supported Ball's (2017) claims and the trajectory framework guiding the study that "policies are contested, interpreted and 're-written' (enacted) in the arenas of practice and the rhetoric, texts and meaning of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practice" (p. 10).

The national QA system adopted the integrated model which combined internal and external QA mechanisms to achieve four dominant purposes of the QA system: accountability, regulation and control, compliance and maintenance of standards, and improvement of quality. This required NCHE to both define and control the improvement and accountability agenda. However, there was very little critical reflection and deliberation about these competing dimensions of QA and working notion or definition (s) of quality. The QA system was rolled out without formal explicit definition (s) of quality such that the shared understanding of 'quality' among stakeholders was missing. Accreditation, which covered both institution and programmes was the main QA procedure. Improvement of quality was considered as other regulated activities linked to the accountability system. The important element of improvement built in the system was the institutional audits and monitoring follow-up visits undertaken after accreditation to ensure suggested improvements are put in place. NCHE was further mandated to facilitate establishment of formal internal QA (IQA) system and structures for HEIs to engage in self-regulation that enhances quality. However, in practice, NCHE was unable to regularly carryout monitoring follow-up visits and had never conducted a comprehensive institutional audit. Also, notwithstanding NCHE directive, formal IQA systems were yet to be fully institutionalised in universities. Thus, despite quality improvement being embedded in the design of the national QA system, the implementation of the system during the 'first phase' examined by the study appeared to be about regulatory control, compliance and accountability. This underscored the complexity of balancing internal and external QA mechanisms discussed in literature (Westerheijden et al., 2014). The next chapter examines the influence of the national QA system on practices within HEIs.

Chapter Nine

Influence of the national QA system procedures on practices within universities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation

9.0. Introduction

This chapter provides findings for research question four: What has been the influence of the national QA system and procedures on the higher education sector and on practices within universities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation by NCHE? This constituted the context of outcome or effects in the trajectory framework, which distinguished between first order and second order effects. First order effects are changes in practices and structures evident within the institution and across the system while the second order effects are the impact of these changes (Ball 1994b, 2006). The findings covered the first order effects particularly, changes in structures and practices that might have taken place within universities and across the higher education system resulting from the accreditation processes by NCHE based on perspectives of participants at national and local level within universities. The analysis within universities focused on three core areas covered by the national QA system: institutional governance and management; academic programmes; and research and publications (NCHE, 2015c). The results are presented by themes and sub-themes in two broad sections (Table 12). The first section discusses influence of the national QA system across the higher education sector. This is followed by influence of the national QA procedures on practices within universities drawing on views of senior university managers, academic unit managers and academic staff at three case HIEs: one private university (CS1-PvtU) and two constituent colleges of the oldest public university - CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU respectively (refer Chapter five, 5.3.1 and 5.4 for contextual details).

Table 12: Themes and sub-themes related to the influence of the national QA system

Dimension	Themes and sub-themes
Influence across the higher education sector	• Brought Sanity • Documentation • Public consciousness about quality standards

Influence within the case institutions	• Institutional governance and management
	    • Governance structures
	    • Governance and IQA policies
	    • Internal quality assurance Unit or Directorate
	    • Enhanced infrastructure and physical resources
	• Academic programme development, teaching & learning
	    • Academic programme development and review
	    • Student assessment
	    • Teaching and learning practices
	    • Student evaluation of courses and teaching
	    • Academic staff recruitment and Development
	• Research and publications

9.1. Influence of national QA system procedures across the higher education sector.

Participants were asked about what they observed were the major influences of the national QA system regulated by NCHE across the higher education sector. Three-themes were generated: brought sanity; documentation; and public consciousness about quality standards.

9.1.1. Brought 'sanity'

Seventeen respondents mentioned that the coming of NCHE had played a big role to "bring sanity" in the higher education sector to the advantage of students, the higher education system, and the nation. By 'sanity' some explained that when entrepreneurs would want to venture into higher education provision business, they now make sure that they have the necessary pre-requisites to meet the required quality standards. One official at Ministry of Education stated:

> Today there is sanity. NCHE has brought sanity. You cannot start an institution until you are registered. To do that people try their best to put in place facilities, equipment, personnel, and resources. Otherwise without NCHE people could start a university without any facilities and resources. So, I would say, the influence of NCHE on the higher education sector is that it has brought sanity (MoEST 01)

The concept of 'sanity' was further explicated in terms of controlling the proliferation of sub-standard institutions and programmes by preventing entry and de-registering institutions and programmes that fail to fulfil the standards to be fully and duly accredited. Three respondents stated that "there was a lot of 'chaos' before the establishment of NCHE" because individuals

could easily open a university without any capacity to operate one (CS1-PvtU-LectDC). However, "NCHE has made it difficult for individuals and organizations to open a university" (NCHE 02). The proprietor needs to make huge investments to establish a university that can meet the minimum standards to be registered by NCHE. This meant that "the higher education market could not be clouded by every 'Jim and jack', but only serious investors", who were willing to offer quality education (CS1-PvtU-VC). One KI at NCHE attested that "some institutions, just looking at the minimum standards felt they could not manage them. They pulled out and died a natural death" (NCHE 03). The other KI explained that when NCHE started assessing institutions and programmes for registration and accreditation some universities that had been accredited by the then existing Credentials and Evaluation Committee (CEC) and the Ministry of Education, Directorate of Higher Education were de-registered by NCHE, while most public and private universities and their programmes were accredited with conditions for failing to meet the minimum standards (NCHE 01).

NCHE published press releases from 2016 to 2022 reviewed by the researcher confirmed that fourteen private HEIs were de-registered and/or closed while seven were denied accreditation. Ten were accredited with conditions and only six institutions were initially fully and duly accredited. NCHE also denied registration of seventy programmes and rejected accreditation of sixty-four programmes while one hundred and twelve programmes were accredited with conditions and only sixty-one programmes were fully and duly accredited in private universities. Similarly, six public HEIs were accredited with conditions while only two were fully and dully accredited. NCHE had denied accreditation for eight programmes and accredited one hundred and fifty programmes with conditions against ninety-four programmes that were fully and duly accredited in public universities. Some of the institutions and programmes that were denied accreditation or were accredited with conditions have had to address the shortfalls and comply with NCHE standards to eventually become fully and duly accredited.

9.1.2. Documentation

Harvey (2007) observed that "QA procedures encourages or even forces compliance in production of information, be it statistical data, prospectuses, or course documents". This represents "the minimum required shift from an entirely producer-oriented approach to higher education to one that acknowledges the rights of other stakeholders to minimum information and a degree of 'service" (p. 4). Most respondents indicated that the QA system brought a sense

of responsibility for HEIs in Malawi to have well organized documentation. As one KI at NCHE stated:

> One main problem in Malawi has been documentation. But now with the coming of NCHE, higher education institutions know that NCHE wants evidence. So, the major influence has been that HEIs have begun to document their processes, policies, and procedures (NCHE 03).

This was echoed by sixteen respondents from HEIs including six deans of faculty, one head of department, five senior lecturers, one QA director, two registrars and one associate professor who claimed that one major influence of the national QA system was improved documentation and record management system within the universities. One stated that in the past they would develop a programme, but when asked where the documentation for stakeholder consultations is, there would be none (CS1-PvtU-Lect-DC). Another respondent stated that "we now have well organized documentation for programmes and policies, which without the push from NCHE, we would not have been able to do" (CS3-PubU-Dean01). Still, others explained that when NCHE is assessing a faculty, they would ask for minutes of meetings and 'scan' through to have an idea of the depth and relevance of those minutes (NTWG 01-Dean). One Dean of faculty concluded that:

> The most important thing that I have noted is record keeping or the keeping of documents. This time around everything that happens, there must be minutes. Before NCHE, not everything would be documented. But now we document everything (CS1-PvtU-Dean02).

Thus, documentation appeared to be something that HEIs had taken for granted. This could be true for most HEIs in Malawi. But the standards and criteria for accreditation set by NCHE compelled "institutions to go an extra mile to make sure that they have processes, that are documented so that they can show as evidence" (NCHE 02). This meant practices and procedures that were taken for granted have had to be made explicit and clearly documented (Maniku, 2008). This in turn facilitated the development of university prospectuses and publication of the vision, mission, academic programmes, and other information on university websites.

9.1.3. Public consciousness about quality standards

The accreditation processes by NCHE opened the 'black box' of higher education and allowed the public to know what was going on within HEIs. The regular publication of information by NCHE on whether the institutions or programme was accredited was helping the public and

institutions to become conscious about quality standards. One official at Ministry of Education stated that "we have noticed quite a significant influence. People are now conscious about issues of quality and standards" (MoEST 03). This was supported by one published NCHE press release where:

> "The NCHE received concerns from the general public that Exploits University had paraded students who had not satisfied the basic requirements for graduation and award of qualifications during their 27th September 2019 Graduation Ceremony. The Council resolved that the students who did not satisfy the minimum requirements for graduation should not be granted awards to protect the integrity of higher education qualifications in Malawi. The Council also resolved to issue a written warning to Exploits University" (NCHE Press Release, April 2020).

The other KIs explained that students have become conscious about institutional compliance with standards, and they operate as whistle blowers whenever some institutions mainly private universities try to "paint dull things bright" (NTGW 01-Dean) by for instance claiming they "have adequate staff and equipment when in actual sense they don't have" (MoEST 02). One incident was reported where external reviewers were told that the institution does not have physical books, because the library was electronic. As the key informant stated:

> We said can we test? We opened this computer it failed. We went to another computer, it failed. We said, what is happening with your computers? Then students said, NCHE these computers were borrowed when they heard you were coming. Imagine if they can manage to cheat us at that high level. So, students have become conscious. I tell you students are whistle blowers (MoEST 03).

The other respondents viewed public consciousness about quality standards in terms of the growing interest of students to study at an accredited institution. Two KI at NCHE pointed out that NCHE regularly get calls from students, guardians, and parents to inquire if the university they have applied to is accredited. They further claimed that although a duly registered institution and programme could enrol students as it works toward accreditation, "students were no longer interested when informed that the institution was not accredited but only registered" (NCHE 01). On the contrary, five respondents from HEIs observed that some programmes that failed accreditation were still running and enrolling new students in other universities. Some opined that it appeared students were not concerned much about programme accreditation particularly in 'traditional' universities, but the reputation of the university, while others argued that the NCHE was not doing enough to have a real effect, what one termed the "biting effect" because it lacked enforcement mechanisms (CS3-PubU-Dean02). However, respondents concurred with the official at Ministry of Education that NCHE had helped HEIs to be mindful of quality standards. As one registrar succinctly put it: "there are two positive marks that NCHE

has left after the first round of accreditation. A culture of being conscious that we need to observe standards and second, the need to self-evaluate" (CS3-PubU-R). These sentiments were echoed by the one vice chancellor who started that

> We are now aware and very careful about making sure that we stick to standards because we know that there is somebody who is going to check on us. Without NCHE somethings were allowed just to go. But now that NCHE is on our neck, we know we cannot do that (CS-PubU-VC)

This indicated that the mere fact that institutions were being assessed and monitored by the national QA agency or an external body was pushing HEIs to be conscious about standards. This was "putting senior university managers on their toes to regularly monitor the institution's compliance with standards" (CS3-PubU-HoD).

9.2. Influence of national QA procedures on practices within the case study HEIs

Participants were also asked about what they perceived were the major changes brought by the NCHE QA and accreditation processes on core areas of university activities within their respective institutions. Results were organized in three broad themes: institutional governance and management; academic programme development, teaching and learning; and research and publications.

9.2.1. Institutional governance and management

Sahlin & Eriksson-zitherist (2016) noted that QA reforms often provoke structural, organizational and managerial changes within HEIs. Data suggested that NCHE brought some structural changes related to (1) university governance structure; (2) governance policies; (3) internal QA (IQA) management system; and (4) enhanced infrastructure and physical resources.

9.2.1.1. Governance structures

NCHE (2015) considers governance and management the primary leverage tool for improving quality in all aspects of the institution, hence prescribed the governance structure for HEIs in Malawi consisting of organs responsible for corporate governance (the University Council), academic governance (the Senate), administration (executive leadership) and various committees at faculty and departmental level. NCHE noticed that most private universities had proprietors and their family members directly involved at every level of university governance and management, which created problems of accountability. As such, there was an emphasis

on structures for students and faculty involvement in decision making and the independence of the university council from the trustees or shareholders (proprietors) of the university.

Considering the above, interviews with senior university managers and academic unit managers at CS1-PvtU private university revealed that there had been some institutional re-organization in terms of changes to the university governance structure. However, some claimed the changes were not the result of NCHE directive, but due to factors internal to the institution. According to the vice chancellor and the QA director, the internal need to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in management following the expansion of the university led to the dissolution of some top management positions such as the deputy vice chancellor and the creation of three separate directorate of finance, academic affairs, and administration (Registrar). On the other hand, the director of research and one dean of faculty stated that the need to comply with NCHE brought changes to the composition of the university council and its relationship with the trustees, where some Bishops who were registered as the trustees of the university were removed from the University Council to ensure its independence. The governance structure also made the provision for consideration of student views in decision-making through the enactment of the student union. The director indicated:

> We have had some changes in the governance structure of the university. There are certain requirements by NCHE in terms of ownership of the university. So, the structure of the university has changed a little bit. The separation of the university council from the bishops. The power and role of senate, senior management, and separation of administrative issues from academic issues. And the power of the student union and student council has come in because of NCHE (CS1-PvtU-DirR)

The dean of faculty however, explained that two Bishops remained as chairperson and as a member of the university council respectively, and that unlike in public universities, the student union was not represented in the university council. He further contested the directive of NCHE stating that it was unreasonable for NCHE to remove the owner or proprietor of the university from the main governance structure particularly the university council and executive leadership because a private university is a business and the owner needed to be part of the governance structure to safeguard their investment (CS1-PvtU-Dean01).

At CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU public university colleges, respondents claimed the NCHE did not bring any change to the university governance structure. Some perceived that this was because the institutions already had a “clear governance structure” (CS3-PubU-R), while others

attributed this to the fact that the governance structure prescribed by NCHE was adapted from the existing governance structure in public universities (CS2-PubU-HoD). However, two professors at CS3-PubU stated that there had been intense debate before the establishment of NCHE where stakeholders agreed to reform traditional collegial management structures that were dominant in public universities in Malawi by adopting the executive model of management in line with principles of new public management to deal with quality issues faced by institutions (CS3-PubU-Prof). Documentary evidence confirmed that after the government reform of unbundling the University of Malawi in 2021 the institution created management structures for executive deans. Thus, although this may not have been directly influenced by NCHE as claimed by respondents, it supported the literature that QA reforms tend to bring changes in higher education in the direction of increased managerialism (Shepherd, 2018).

9.2.1.2. Governance and other internal quality assurance (IQA) policies

NCHE requires an institution to have governance policies and various internal QA (IQA) policies and procedures. One vice chancellor stressed that: "NCHE has a checklist of policies that must be there. If you do not have them, they will tell you to develop them" (CS-PubU-VC). Governance policies basically provide formal instruments that clarify institutional structures and procedures to avoid mismanagement and ensure effectiveness, while internal QA policies focus on procedures and processes for nurturing the quality culture (Martin, 2018). The evidence revealed that the three HEIs had governance and IQA policies and regulations for various core university activities before the NCHE, although, at CS1-PvtU private university some policies had been developed to comply with NCHE standards.

At CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU being colleges of the same public university, policies and regulations on QA and enhancement; qualifications framework and sub-degree awards; development of academic programmes; student evaluation of teaching and learning; internal moderation of assessment; and external examination had been reviewed, documented and approved by the university way before NCHE in 2009 (University of Malawi, 2009). The vice chancellor, registrars, one head of department and one senior lecturer stated that being the oldest public university in Malawi, "NCHE inherited most of [their] existing policies and procedures" (CS2-PubU-HoD). However, NCHE played a significant role to ensure that existing policies were shared to members of staff. Most interviewed academic staff explained that they hardly had access to formal policies. The QA practices were mainly learnt informally through socialisation of junior academic staff by their seniors (CS3-PubU-AsProf02). NCHE

accreditation processes forced university management to share the available policies with members of staff. In readiness for external evaluation by NCHE, members of staff were given various policy documents and advised to take time to read and familiarise themselves with the policies in case anyone of them would be interviewed by external reviewers (CS2-PubU-Lecturer). At CS1-PvtU private university two senior university managers conceded that NCHE brought additional benchmarks for the institution to attain, such that "some policies had been developed because the NCHE developed guidelines" (CS1-PvtU-DirR). The QA and enhancement; research and publications; and staff training and development policies were cited among those developed to comply with NCHE. Thus, the national QA procedures significantly influenced development of policies in the private university than the two public institutions.

Mhlanga (2008) study of QA in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe argued that where external QA systems require production of policies and QA procedure manuals, there may be an initial impetus towards quality improvement. But the effect is short-lived and not sustainable because of the tendency by most institutions to become pre-occupied with developing 'good' policies in order to attain accreditation but without commensurate 'good' implementation in practice. This was the case at the three HEIs where some policies did not have implementation plans and neither were they linked to the institutional budget. As one respondent indicated, "most policies are not linked to the institutional budget and remain just a dream" (CS3-PubU-SnrLect). The registrar for CS3-PubU explained that the culture of putting operations in line with formal policies was not there. "NCHE can push for very beautiful policies. But they may end up just on the shelves, waiting until NCHE comes for another review and then we go and fish them out" (CS3-PubU-R). Thus, although NCHE might have good intentions in prescribing policies and procedures to provide a framework within which HEIs can develop and monitor effectiveness of their QA practices, in some cases this end up being a window dressing exercise where institution develop policies simply to tick the box.

9.2.1.3. Internal quality assurance (IQA) unit or directorate

As stated in chapter eight, NCHE was mandated to facilitate establishment of internal QA system and structures in HEIs. Data revealed that the three HEIs had an established internal QA office, which operated as a stand-alone directorate of QA and enhancement, headed by the QA director, who was a senior academic member of staff from the university. The QA director was part of senior management and directly accountable to the vice chancellor at CS1-PvtU and the College Principal at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU. This aligned with the trend in Europe

(Sursock, 2011) and most African countries (Materu, 2007; Okae-Adjei, 2016) where QA offices report directly to university management. This is assumed to enhance the success of university QA activities by ensuring that the IQA system is part of the overall university strategic planning and management (Lemaitre, 2018).

Some respondents pointed out that the establishment of the IQA unit/structures at the three institutions was motivated by the coming of NCHE and thereby saw it as one influence of NCHE on institution quality management. As the registrar at CS2-PubU stated:

> The need for the University of Malawi to have an office specifically to look at quality assurance issues was mainly motivated by the coming of the national council for higher education. It was necessary that although departments, faculties and management strive to maintain quality, there should be an office that should solely be dedicated to quality assurance in line with the aspiration of government enshrined in the documents of the national council for higher education. This is what brought the structure of quality assurance in the university (CS2-PubU-R).

On the contrary, the vice chancellor for the two public institutions and the QA director for CS1-PvtU argued that the university's decision to establish the IQA system/unit was not directly influenced by NCHE, although the NCHE might have ultimately reinforced the creation of the QA units. According to the vice chancellor, the idea of setting up the QA directorate in the university was driven internally. "There was a realisation that the university was failing short to be globally competitive and had deficiencies in terms of academic quality in several areas". The idea was conceived in 2006 and adopted in the university's QA and enhancement policy which was approved in 2009 (CS-PubU-VC). The QA director at CS1-PvtU pointed out that being a member of the Association of Catholic Universities and Higher Institutions of Africa and Madagascar (ACUHIAM), the ACUHIAM demanded the creation of internal QA units and structures in all its member universities in 2007 and supported the initiative from 2009-2012 (CS1-PvtU-QAD). This supported the literature that internal quality management structures may be driven both internally and externally, but essentially the IQA processes are operated by institutions themselves (Utuka, 2012).

Although university QA policies outlined IQA approaches, priority areas covered in quality management and several functions of the QA Directorate, in practice the functions performed by the QA directorate at the three institutions were both similar and limited in scope. Respondents indicated that the QA directorate mainly provided support or guidance to departments and faculties during programme development to ensure that they "follow standards

and processes of curriculum development and review stipulated by the university, professional bodies and the NCHE" (CS2-PubU-QAD). The QA directorate also coordinated the student evaluation of courses and lecturers at the end of every semester. Respondents mentioned that the QA directorate was responsible for developing assessment tools, analysing data and writing students feedback reports. The QA directorate further operated as the contact point with NCHE and was responsible for coordinating institutional self-evaluations and audits; monitoring implementation of improvement plans; preparing QA monitoring reports; and maintaining a close working relationship with all other units in the institution on matters pertaining to QA.

Data further revealed that the IQA structures were yet to be successfully institutionalized at the three institutions. Despite the QA directorate/unit requiring recruitment of specialised staff to perform its many functions, they operated with inadequate staff which affected the operation of the QA offices. At CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU, the QA unit had only one staff member, the QA director, while CS1-PvtU had two personnel, the QA director, and the deputy, but the deputy QA director had just been recruited at the time of this study. Apart from performing functions of the QA directorate, the QA directors had full teaching loads and postgraduate research supervision responsibilities. Faced with heavy workload demands they prioritised teaching over QA functions as the directorship for QA was considered a "side job" (CS1-PvtU-QAD). The institutions were required to have the university QA committee (QAC) to oversee quality processes and provide strategic direction set by university management to the QA directorate. However, the QA committees (QAC) had been put in place when the institutions were preparing for accreditation assessment by NCHE. At the time of this study, the QAC at CS1-PvtU and CS2-PubU had disbanded, while at CS3-PubU it was not functional. Also, the QA directorates had never had time to look at QA issues away from accreditation. The only self-assessments that had been conducted, were designed to comply with accreditation procedures by NCHE. Materu (2007) observed that independent institutional reviews outside the accreditation process, is an excellent way in which to foster the culture of quality and help institutions upgrade their faculties, departments, and programmes, since there is little concern about the public embarrassment from mediocre accreditation results. This view resonated with most respondents at the three institutions who noted that the QA unit/directorate was very important in efforts to enhance the quality of education in the institution. "But in practice the QA directorate was not functioning as much as people expected" (CS3-PubU-AssProf01).

9.2.1.4. Enhanced infrastructure and physical resources

Twenty-two respondents interviewed at the three institutions observed that the major influence of the NCHE QA processes had been the improved teaching and learning conditions with enhanced infrastructure and physical resources in the institutions. As noted in chapter six, most of the existing infrastructure at public institutions in Malawi were designed to cater for small classes and it had proven difficult to adapt the use of this infrastructure with higher student enrolments. Similarly, CS1-PvtU private university was established at what used to be a teacher training college originally designed to accommodate only 120 students (CS1-PvtU-Dean01). The poor funding allocation in support of infrastructure maintenance further resulted in a steady decline in the quality of physical facilities. This meant that to attain accreditation status institutions had to improve the teaching and learning conditions, particularly the classrooms, lecture theatres, libraries, and laboratories.

At CS3-PubU, the registrar stated that the coming of NCHE motivated the institution to prioritise the expansion of infrastructure as well as providing standards to follow when building infrastructure. The registrar pointed out that the institution had built four new lecture theatres, three science laboratory complexes, two computer science teacher education laboratories and two science teacher education laboratories under the World Bank supported Skills Development Project (SDP) coordinated by NCHE (CS3-PubU-R). Two academic managers and four academic staff reported infrastructural changes related to the renovation of student hostels and erecting new sanitary and recreation facilities for students.

At CS1-PvtU two senior university managers, three academic managers and two academic staff recounted that the library was redesigned to create special sections for the faculty of law, Malawian literature, and study spaces and new books were bought for the library replacing outdated ones. The student computer laboratories were upgraded and dilapidated classrooms renovated. The institution replaced all chalkboards in classrooms with whiteboards and LCD Projectors were purchased and installed in classrooms to comply with NCHE standards (CS1-PvtU-Dean03). The institution had built some new lecture theatres while others were still under construction. According to respondents, “although this was within the institution development strategy, its implementation had been accelerated by the NCHE accreditation processes” (CS1-PvtU-HoD). Similarly, at CS2-PubU, three senior university managers, two academic managers and three academic staff attested that to attain accreditation, dilapidated classrooms, lecturer theatres, the library, science laboratory and students’ hostels were “renovated” (CS2-

PubU-QAD). Physical resources such as computers for lecturers and student computer rooms and new books for the library were bought and classrooms were mounted with LCD projectors (CS2-PubU-HoD). Furthermore, as part of preparation for external evaluation by NCHE, the institution had to convert the cafeterias into the nursing and midwifery skills laboratories, since the existing nursing and midwifery skills laboratories were small and could not accommodate the larger number of students within the institution (CS2-PubU-SnrLect02).

Respondents also revealed that initially the infrastructure at the three institutions were not disability friendly and safety issues could be ignored. But to comply with NCHE standards, the institutions had to build lumps on footsteps for wheelchairs to make the infrastructure accessible to people with physical disability and fire assembly points were put up and fire extinguishers bought and placed in various places. This indicated that the pressure to conform to standards for accreditation set by the NCHE both created an opportunity and forced institutions to improve the infrastructure and physical facilities. However, this did not imply that institutions now have adequate physical facilities. Some respondents also admitted that with the ever-increasing student enrolments, the infrastructure was still inadequate to meet the minimum standards and that some recommendations by the NCHE were outstanding due to lack of funding to build new infrastructure (CS2-PubU-HoD).

9.2.2. Academic programme development, teaching and learning process

The national QA system influence on programme development, teaching and learning practices was discussed in five sub-themes: (1) academic programme development and review; (2) student assessment; (3) teaching and learning process; (4) student evaluation of courses; and (5) academic staff recruitment and development.

9.2.2.1. Academic programme development and review

Among the most important elements determining the quality of student learning is the quality and relevance of academic programmes. Public universities in Malawi have traditionally been autonomous and characterised by the dominance of academic self-regulation of QA. Data showed that in all three case institutions due emphasis was placed on quality assuring academic programme development and review activities and a significant amount of convergence was noted in terms of structures and practices that had been in place to take care of this aspect. However, unlike at CS1-PvtU private university, the two public institutions (CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU) had a policy on programme development that outlined rigorous standard procedures

and regulations for programme development and review and internal programme moderation and approval. The regulations and procedures were adapted in the NCHE's "template for programme curriculum development and course/module specification", which aimed to enhance quality of curricula and harmonise the structure of programmes curriculum in higher education in Malawi. As such respondents interviewed at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU claimed that NCHE did not bring major changes to procedures for programme development.

On the other hand, the registrar and three deans of faculty at CS1-PvtU private university stated that the adoption of national standards for programme development and templates for programme and courses recommended by NCHE brought major changes to curriculum design and development process at CS1-PvtU. One dean even protested that the university had their way of developing programmes and syllabus or course outlines and that "the template brought by NCHE was a burden to programme developers" (CS1-PvtU-Dean02). However, the three other respondents noted that the NCHE had "added value" to institutional processes by improving the quality of programme curriculum design and ensuring that programmes are subjected to a rigorous development process (CS1-PvtU-Dean01). One Dean stated:

> In terms of the structure of the course outlines, it is different from the way we used to do. I think quite a number of things have changed. The procedures for developing programmes have also changed. Now it is very different because we have to go through NCHE. All these procedures that we follow is a recommendation from NCHE that when you want to develop programmes it has to go through this and that. They check if you have minute's documenting the processes that they recommend to be followed (CS1-PvtU-Dean03).

Thus, a rigorous process of programme development and internal programme moderation and approval was followed where the reviewed or newly developed programme went through various university/college committee vetting structures. Both the concept paper proposing the new programme and the actual programme developed at departmental level were sequentially subjected to detailed assessment by the faculty; then college academic committee, and later university Academic Planning and Course Committee (APCC), the senate committee at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU, while at CS1-PvtU, the programme was assessed by the faculty, then university Academic Course Committee after which it went to the university senate for final scrutiny and approval. At each stage, the programme was evaluated to ensure that the curriculum design has followed established procedures and meets quality standards of the university, professional bodies, and the NCHE. This was followed by the external QA

dimension where programmes were assessed by professional bodies in case of professional programmes and finally the NCHE for registration and accreditation.

Five academic unit managers and four academic staff interviewed at the three institutions described the influence of NCHE in terms of adjustments that were made to curricula prompted by the need to bring it into line with standards of the accreditation procedures. The most cited changes were standardisation of the structure of the curriculum and course outlines according to NCHE template. This included the inclusion of employability skills and mandatory industrial/practice attachment for technical and professional programmes and updating course outlines with current source of information. By updating curricula and course outlines it ensured that institutions were contemporary in terms of what they teach and that their graduates have industry relevant knowledge and skills. This was appreciated by academic staff, some of whom testified that: "NCHE has managed to lift us in terms of updating our work" (CS3-PubU-SnrLect) while one dean conceded that: "I would not want to dismiss everything. Most of our programmes have really been updated" (CS3-PubU-Dean02).

At CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU, respondents further pointed out that NCHE accreditation process provided an opportunity to review programme curricula; develop curriculum documents; and ensure that academic programmes were informed by the needs of diverse stakeholders. One professor stated that the "NCHE has brought the urgency that we should always review the curricula as required" noting that without NCHE some departments could not comply (CS2-PubU-AsProf). The vice chancellor gave an example of programmes that were discovered at CS3-PubU that had "not been reviewed for nearly fifteen years" (CS-PubU-VC). However, he observed that because of NCHE, all those programmes that had gone beyond their validation period have subsequently been reviewed. Similarly, three respondents explained the major weaknesses that was observed at CS2-PubU that ten programmes at the time of external assessment were outdated and needed to be reviewed. One dean stressed that the problem of outdated curricula "was a very big weakness which we registered and this one has lived with us for a very long time". But the NCHE had given the institution a timeline within which to review all programme curricula (CS2-PubU-Dean).

Respondents stated that some departments at CS3-PubU had for a long time run programmes using isolated course outlines without a comprehensive curriculum document. One academic staff narrated that they "had a challenge because some programmes started in the 1960s. Finding

the actual programme documents became a problem. We could only find isolated course outlines" (CS3-PubU-AsProf02). The other respondent observed that with the lack of programme documents, deans and heads of department could not know "what people are supposed to teach, otherwise people were just teaching whatever they wanted". However, the NCHE accreditation process compelled departments to develop comprehensive programme curriculum documents. According to the respondent, "we had to put those things together. We now have curriculum documents and the syllabi" (CS3-PubU-SnrLect-DC).

In addition, although some faculties and departments at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU could review their programmes regularly following institutional procedures, for other departments stakeholder consultations were limited. The QA director at CS2-PubU stated that "the involvement of students in curriculum development has been one of the influences of NCHE" (CS2-PubU-QAD). Similarly, one respondent observed that some programmes at CS3-PubU were provisionally accredited, subject to ensuring that the required processes of stakeholder consultations were satisfied, because departments had not conducted wider consultations with stakeholders during curriculum review. The respondent admitted that the provisional accreditation outcome, put a lot of pressure on the head of departments to satisfy the conditions for fear that the programme would be unaccredited (CS3-PubU-AsProf02). This showed that the NCHE accreditation brought a degree of seriousness in ensuring that programmes that are developed by HEIs in Malawi were relevant to the industry and informed by the needs of diverse stakeholders.

9.2.2.2. Student assessment

Student assessment is integral to the teaching and learning process and a critical facet towards providing an appropriate basis for improvement in standards of university education (Okoche, 2017). NCHE standards for academic assessment requires that end of semester examination papers must pass the validity and reliability test and that the external examinations system should be employed during the final year courses and projects and to certify the overall performance of graduating students (NCHE, 2015).

As with the programme development process, it was observed that the three case institutions deployed the committee vetting systems and use of external examiners to ensure standards of assessment practices. The institutions had a robust internal vetting or moderation system for examinations and grades before NCHE. They also had comprehensive booklets of student

assessment and progression regulations and procedures in place, which precisely documented the handling of examinations and interpretation of results to ensure that good practice is employed for assessment. When lecturers have developed end of semester examinations, they were vetted or moderated at departmental level. The vetting considered the technical, content, and language aspects of questions, which was similar to what scholars have written about the vetting process (Hassan, Simbak, & Mohd Yussof, 2016). Thereafter, at CS3-PubU end of year examinations, while at CS2-PubU and CS1-PvtU final year examinations were sent for external examining. When examinations have been administered and marked, the grades were also subjected to vetting or moderation which begun at department level, then faculty, and at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU also college level before grades could be moderated and finally approved by the university senate. At CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU samples of marked scripts were also sent to external examiners to ensure that the marking was systematic and that sometimes external examiners would visit the institutions to look at what they do and give comprehensive feedback.

Despite the above, the NCHE accreditation procedures were perceived to have contributed to strengthening the external examining system at undergraduate level. It appeared, although the external examination system has operated in the Malawian higher education sector since the establishment of the first public university in 1965, and still seemed to enjoy considerable level of trust among institutions, it had in the recent past been active only at postgraduate level. Msiska (2016) in his study attested that the system of external examining had been there in two Malawian public universities and one private university but was no longer being practiced at undergraduate level, while it had never existed in some private universities. The main reason was identified as financial, where universities operating under very tight budgets could be less willing to spend on external examining when pressed with other critical needs. The universities would simply rely on internal moderation of undergraduate examinations by its lecturers (Msiska, 2016). In this study, some respondents at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU observed that there was lack of internal enforcement mechanism that “if you don’t send your exams to external examiners, you will not administer the exam” (CS3-PubU-Dean01). Some departments could engage external examiners, while for other faculties and departments the external examining system was not regular. There were semesters or academic years when external examiners were not appointed and “this happened all the time” (CS3-PubU-Prof). However, with NCHE procedures, “the university was emphasizing the idea of having internal and external examiners as one way of enhancing the quality of education” (CS2-PubU-Dean).

The study found that at CS1-PvtU private university the external examining system had been embraced following NCHE requirements. One dean confirmed that:

> "The issue of external examiners is the other change brought by NCHE. You know being a small university, there are issues of money. We would look at cost of engaging external examiners. But NCHE made it a point that sunk into the minds of administrators that this exercise is important and must be adopted by the university. So, they added a better voice on us" (CS1-PvtU-Dean01)

The above views were echoed by two senior university managers and two academic unit managers at CS1-PvtU who however, pointed out that although the external examining system was adopted as a matter of policy, the institution "has not made use of the provision in a very serious and consistent way" (CS1-PvtU-VC). The system was practiced for only "two years" and at the time of this study, it had been "temporarily" stopped (CS1-PvtU-Dean03), due to what was termed logistical issues where "the exams would be sent to the external examiner, but the feedback would not come until students write the examinations" (CS1-PvtU-QAD).

9.2.2.3. Teaching and learning practice

The rigour of the teaching and learning practices of an institution determines the quality of delivery. This forms the cutting edge of an educational institution, as it is what impacts student learning (Mhlanga, 2008). The emphasis of NCHE QA procedures on teaching and learning practices was not directly evident and its influence at the three case institutions was subject to debate. Four senior university managers and one academic staff claimed that NCHE had brought increased awareness of good teaching and improved undergraduate classroom teaching practice. They perceived that with the coming of NCHE, lecturers were "not just teaching for the sake of it" (CS2-PubU-Lecturer). By this, one explained that whatever academic staff were doing, they were always "mindful of NCHE standards and guidelines" (CS3-PubU-R). The QA director at CS1-PvtU noted that the NCHE QA processes had reinforced the increased use of participatory teaching methods even in courses which were perceived to be too technical where lessons would normally be delivered through teacher centred methods (CS1-PvtU-QAD). The vice chancellor for CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU claimed that academic staff were becoming aware that "they must teach and up their game, and there was improvement in the way they were teaching, which was the direct impact from the NCHE accreditation process" (CS-PubU-VC).

On the contrary, one senior university manager, four deans, two heads of department and six academic staff disputed claims that NCHE procedures had brought changes to teaching and learning practices at the three institutions. The most common view was that it was difficult to say there was any improvement in teaching practices and student learning "because most of the things that are done by NCHE did not directly affect what happens in the classroom" (CS1-PvtU-Dean02). The sentiments were shared by all the thirteen respondents who observed that NCHE accreditation processes do not focus on the actual teaching and learning practices in the classroom, but verification of paperwork on curricula design and development, assessment methods, quantity and quality of teachers, how course outlines and teaching plans are written, teaching methods and hours allocated to the course. While some believed "this provided important guidance" (CS1-PvtU-Dean01), for many others, the assumption that when these parameters were in place, quality teaching and learning would take place in the classroom was considered unrealistic and "not enough to improve quality of teaching and learning practices" (CS1-PvtU-Dean03). The contention was clearly captured in this quote.

> NCHE standards and procedures improves the general quality of the institution in terms of inputs. But even after having all these it is possible that quality teaching and learning may not happen. When it comes to the actual quality of teaching and learning, we still need interventions from institutions themselves. So, I think NCHE has set the structure and environment for quality teaching, but the institutions have a duty to make sure that quality teaching is indeed happening in the classroom (CS2-PubU-R).

This suggested that there might be huge differences on how various actors within the university perceive the influence of the NCHE QA mechanisms on teaching and learning practices. It appeared although senior university managers were somewhat detached from the classroom, they tended to see more positive effects than academic unit managers and academic staff. It was possible that senior university managers had a superficial positive disposition simply because they were greatly involved in NCHE policy processes, while academic staff might have had resentments due to their limited involvement in the design of the national QA system and NCHE policy development processes. Nevertheless, the results pointed to respondents' general reservations about the effectiveness of external QA procedures in improving teaching and learning practices, which was similar to the trend observed in literature globally (Aamodt et al., 2018; Okoche, 2017; Dill, 2020).

9.2.2.4. Student evaluation of courses and teaching

The notable influence of the NCHE procedures observed by respondents was that it provided the incentives for reinforcing student evaluation of courses and teaching. Msiska (2016) noted that student evaluation of courses was not a common activity in public and private universities in Malawi. In this study, data revealed that the student evaluation of courses and teaching had been internally initiated by the university at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU in 2009 but attempts to implement the system faced resistance from academics until NCHE made it mandatory. Most respondents interviewed at the three institutions stated that regular student evaluation of courses at the end of each semester had been adopted as the primary mechanism for monitoring teaching and learning. Students provided feedback on computer-based questionnaires linked to the student management information system by evaluating several quality dimensions at course level, mainly in terms of the design of the course, the lecturers' teaching effectiveness and the extent to which they benefited from the teaching and learning process. At CS1-PvtU, students could not register to write end of semester exams unless they have filled-in the course evaluation questionnaire (CS1-PvtU-Dean01) while at CS3-PubU students had to fill-in the course evaluation questionnaire for them to access end of semester results (CS3-PubU-Prof).

Harvey (2011) stressed that student evaluation is only useful if feedback is integrated into a regular cycle of analysis, reporting and acted upon. The study established that although the QA directorates were responsible for coordinating student evaluation at the three institutions, student evaluation of teaching was better organized at CS3-PubU than at the other two institutions. Eight respondents at CS3-PubU expressed satisfaction noting that student feedback was processed by the system and lectures accessed reports directly through their portal and that reports were also accessible to senior management and academic unit managers for review. Conversely, student feedback processed by the QA directorate was given to lecturers indirectly, through academic unit managers (deans and heads) at CS2-PubU and through senior management (directorate of academic affairs) at CS1-PvtU. However, some lecturers at CS2-PubU claimed that they could not access student feedback reports (CS2-PubU-AsProf), while at CS1-PvtU the vice chancellor indicated that the institution was facing technological problems which affected the processing of student feedback (CS1-PvtU-VC).

Several issues were also raised by respondents relating to student evaluation. One most cited issue was that student rated science subjects which were perceived to be difficult and academic staff who they perceived to be hard on them for giving more assignment very low (CS3-PubU-

Dean03). The other issue was “lack of seriousness and objectivity” which was attributed to the fact that students filled-in questionnaires under compulsion (i.e., condition for them to register for end of semester exams or to access end of semester results) (CS1-PvtU-QAD). This was not however, unique to Malawi as literature demonstrated that lecturers tend to have serious doubts about students’ capacity to make informed judgements as well as some misgivings about their potential bias (Adeyemo, 2015; Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013). Nevertheless, the general view among interviewed respondents at the three institutions was that student course evaluation was important in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Most respondents claimed that student evaluation highlighted the strength and weakness of both the course and the lecturer’s delivery, which in a way helped them to improve in their teaching and curriculum and module design. In addition, unlike at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU public institutions, at CS1-PvtU private university, student evaluation was also used by university management to make administrative decisions about renewal of employment contracts, promotion, and merit raise.

9.2.2.5. Academic staff recruitment and development

The other notable influence of the national QA procedures observed by respondents related to academic staff recruitment and development. A critical element in the delivery of quality education in any institution is the recruitment of suitably qualified academic staff and in appropriate numbers. World Bank (2010) and Mambo et al., (2016) found that the majority of lecturers in both public and private universities in Malawi were associate lecturers holding only undergraduate qualifications despite that university lecturers were required by government policy to have a minimum of a Master’s degree. Data in this study suggested that the reinforcement of minimum standard qualifications for academic staff of master’s degree in a relevant field by NCHE, had helped to reduce the problem of recruiting underqualified academic staff. Respondents pointed out that there had been changes in recruitment where institutions strictly prioritise those with a master’s degree as testified in these two quotes:

> As a private university we relied a lot on students who pass their bachelor’s degree with distinction or credit as associate lecturers. But now it is a requirement we cannot recruit anyone who does not have a master’s degree. NCHE has really helped us that the university employs those with a master’s and above (CS1-PvtU-Lecture-DC).
>
> In the past, members of staff were recruited with a first degree as staff associates in most cases. But that changed. Now recruitment is strictly based on possession of a master’s degree (CS3-PubU-AssProf01).

Some respondents also claimed that the national QA procedures contributed to the expansion of academic staffing levels at CS1-PvtU, although this was not the case at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU. One lecturer at CS1-PvtU private university stated that initially a department could have three lecturers teaching all the courses. But in response to NCHE requirements the institution set the workload standard for a "lecturer to teach a maximum of four courses" (CS1-PvtU-SnrLect). This meant the institution had to employ more lecturers as observed by another respondent that "now we have a huge academic staff compliment of over one hundred, and all these have come because of the requirements of the NCHE" (CS1-PvtU-Lecturer-DC). On the contrary, respondents at CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU public university colleges observed that staffing levels hardly increased and that with the lack of funding, the expansion of staff establishments had been frozen as a cost cutting measure. Whilst the study did not assess the adequacy of staffing levels, interviews suggested that none of the institutions met the standard of students to staff ratio of 18:1 for every programme as prescribed by NCHE.

Staff development was discussed in terms of formally organized training especially further studies leading to higher qualifications. Data showed that improving qualifications of academic staff had always been part of the university strategic plans for the three institutions, however in practice only CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU public institutions prioritised upgrading academic staff (CS3-PubU-AsProf02). At CS1-PvtU private university respondents mentioned that the institution did not initially provide financial support and opportunities for further training of academic staff. One respondent acknowledged that: "I think NCHE has really helped us that the university send most people who had a bachelor's degree to study for a master's degree" (CS1-PvtU-Lecturer-DC). The senior university manager concurred that "It was either lecturers with a bachelor's degree went for further studies or risk being fired" (CS1-PvtU-R). Thus, it appeared the NCHE mostly influenced staff development at CS1-PvtU private university. This was perhaps because public universities have several opportunities for staff development financed by government and development partners, which do not extend to private universities.

9.2.3. Research and publications

The traditional function of a university is to generate knowledge of higher quality and to be able to disseminate that knowledge so that it benefits the wider society. Thus, one of the criteria for judging the quality of university performance is the level of research output both in terms of quantity and quality(Mhlanga, 2008). Valeta, et al., (2016) observed that although there was significant growth in scientific research publications by universities in Malawi, university

research was still not well linked to industry. While public universities had research centres, it was often observed that their research agenda was crude and not responsive to industry needs and that research output remained low compared to other countries in Sub-Sahara Africa. Private universities lacked a distinct focus on research as they mostly relied on tuition fees for their quotidian undertaking, which made it hard for them to allocate funding to research (Mambo et al., 2016).

Data suggested that NCHE QA standards and accreditation processes had done very little to bring improvement in research productivity at the three case institutions but somehow influenced establishment of institutional structures for quality assuring research at CS1-PvtU private university. One respondent claimed that this was the case because NCHE standards and procedures did not emphasise much on university research productivity. He explained:

> We have challenges of research capacity in the higher education sector in Malawi. We have directorates of research in universities, but our research output nationally is quite low. That is why our global ranking, I mean the ranking of Malawian universities in Africa or the world, we are not yet there. Now when you check what the NCHE minimum standards say on research productivity, I do not see any standards for research. NCHE has thirteen minimum standards for QA and accreditation. There are no minimum standards, which specifically talk about research. That is possibly the reason research output is still very low in our universities, because we have not thought about having minimum standards which should focus on research productivity in universities (NTWG01-QAM).

The evidence from NCHE (2015) 'minimum standards' document confirmed that out of NCHE's thirteen standards, eighty four criteria and two hundred and twenty four indicators for QA, none of the standards specifically focused on research. But four criteria namely 'allocation of financial resources to research' and 'evidence-based teaching' under "quality enhancement" (Standard No. 13) and 'master's degree programmes' and 'doctoral degree programmes' under "degree specifications" (Standard No. 12), required that each university should dedicate 1% of its operating budget to research and publication; conduct research to improve teaching and learning services; and ensure that postgraduate programmes are taught and supervised by academic staff with a doctoral degree (PhD) and adequate research experience and publications. It appeared the NCHE standards and accreditation processes were mainly designed for a teaching university.

At CS1-PvtU private university, seven respondents (director of research and publications, QA director, three deans, one head of department, and one senior lecturer) stated during interviews

that research output at the institution was very low. A combination of lack of adequate funding to accord staff effective incentives and heavy teaching loads were cited as some of the main factors affecting research productivity. However, they pointed out that the institution had adopted suggestions from NCHE and the Malawi National Commission for Science and Technology, which played a role to establish structures for quality assuring research. The research policy was developed to guide all research activities within the university. The directorate of research and publications was established to give effect to the policy, and it was responsible for building capacity for research through training workshops, mobilizing resources for research, providing research grants to academic staff; and developing regulations to guide students and their supervisors in preparing bachelors' degree projects and dissertations (CS1-PvtU-Lecturer-DRP). The university introduced the "budget line for research, such that unlike before, there was an institutional budget for research to fund research by staff" although the research grants were small (CS1-PvtU-Dean01). The Research Committee was established which served to scrutinize research to ensure that any proposed research meets the quality requirements (CS1-PvtU-HoD). The undergraduate student dissertations were subjected to critical scrutiny. Students were required to present and defend their research proposal and research report and besides supervisors, the dissertation was marked by two other lecturers (CS1-PvtU-Dean02).

CS2-PubU and CS3-PubU public university colleges defined themselves as teaching and research universities and had the priority focus on research, postgraduate training and undergraduate teaching, although CS3-PubU which hosted five national leading research centres and two referred journals, had a much greater thrust on research than CS2-PubU, which had only one research centre. The institutions had two comprehensive policies: *"research and consultancy policy*"(University of Malawi, 2016a), and *"postgraduate policy*"(University of Malawi, 2016b), originally developed in 2006 and revised in 2016, that encouraged and regulated quality of postgraduate studies and research and publishing by staff. The policies delineated robust structures for QA and management of research activities and postgraduate studies. The pro-vice chancellor was responsible for providing strategic leadership for research and postgraduate studies within the entire university, while the 'dean/directorate of research' and 'dean of postgraduate studies' played a key role to ensure effective management and quality of research and postgraduate studies at college level.

The role of these offices was supported by committee structures that operated at different level within the university. The University Research and Publications Committee (URPC) and University-wide Postgraduate Committee (UPC), senate committees chaired by the pro-vice chancellor were the central bodies for strategic planning of the research enterprise in the university and monitoring standards and vetting recommendations for postgraduate degree awards, respectively. The managerial responsibilities for quality assuring research and postgraduate studies were decentralized to colleges, faculties, and departments. The quality control for postgraduate studies was coordinated by the college postgraduate committee comprising deans, and heads of department and serviced by the dean of postgraduate studies. Research centres were affiliated to faculties and operated in accordance with university regulations. The college research and publications committee (RPC) at CS2-PubU and research ethics committee at CS3-PubU chaired by the dean or director of research, were responsible for approving and monitoring research and ensured that staff and students complied with research standards, ethics, and regulations. The review of proposals by these committees and monitoring adherence to ethics was the critical QA mechanism for research that contributed towards the rigour of proposals by staff and students both undergraduate and postgraduate.

Also, research for both students and staff were subjected to peer review at different stages from proposal development to research publication. In postgraduate research every proposal was subjected to rigorous review by several academics at faculty and departmental level, through mostly organized research seminars. Thus, stringent measures were taken to ensure that any proposed research study does not commerce before it is fully ascertained to meet university quality requirements. There was also the external examination of completed postgraduate theses, which gave the international flavour to research of postgraduate students in the university. The other measure for quality assuring research explained by respondents was that the university only accepted research that is published in referred journals that are widely recognized internationally for promotion of academic staff. If staff publish research in journals that were "classified as grey" there were not accepted for promotion. This compelled staff to produce quality research that can be published in referred journals that have high reputation (CS3-PubU-R).

Despite the above elaborate internal QA structures, NCHE's comments after the assessment of the two institutions was that "research output was very low and they needed to do something on research output" (CS2-PubU-QAD). Five respondents at CS3-PubU and six at CS2-PubU

raised concerns that the university barely provided resources for research but depended much on sporadic research grants from local and international partners and donor countries. Secondly, academic staff were not able to do much research work due to heavy teaching load. Thirdly, academic staff preferred to engage in consultancy work which was financially rewarding than in research and publishing where they enjoyed no monetary benefits. Fourthly, those who conducted and published research were mostly motivated by the desire to be promoted. However, the university did not have strong regulatory mechanisms such that some academic staff could use the problem of funding as an excuse for not conducting research and continue working in the same position without publishing any research until they retire. These according to respondents continued to significantly affect research output and achievement of research excellence in the university despite the NCHE and national QA system being in place.

9.3. Conclusion

The national QA system regulated by NCHE brought varying degrees of changes and improvements in selected core areas of university activities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation. However, the changes could not be wholly attributed to the effect of external quality evaluation. There was evidence that some of the changes were not the result of the NCHE QA procedures but were driven internally by HEIs themselves. The institutions were to some extent more obsessed with demonstrating compliance to external requirements simply to attain accreditation and minimise disruptions to their operations. But the actual implementation of some changes was short-lived and somewhat undermined by lack of support from staff and deployment of insufficient resources by university management. The NCHE procedures mostly influenced changes in the private university, where internal QA procedures did not generally exist for some core university activities compared to the two public universities whose major limitation was lack of compliance to their existing institutional procedures. Thus, it was possible to find variations among HEIs, such that when examining the influence of the national QA system on practices within universities, these variations need to be considered. The changes triggered by the national QA system were mostly structural in nature. These included: strengthening university governance and management structure; enhancement of infrastructure and physical facilities leading to improve teaching and learning conditions; establishment of formal institutional QA structures and monitoring systems for educational processes and research; reducing recruitment of underqualified staff; reinforcing upgrading of staff qualifications to master's and PhD level; and adoption of learning-oriented outcome-based education; high quality curriculum design; and rigorous curriculum development process.

However, the actual influence on improving the quality of teaching and student learning practices was limited. There were indications that improving quality in higher education cannot be merely equated with the formal institutional QA structures and procedures, although this forms part of it, but that the process builds on the norms, values and intrinsic factors related to academics' teaching practices, commitment for teaching and professional accountability. The next chapter analyses the micro-politics of the QA reform by focusing on university's response and structural factors contributing to the implementation gap.

Chapter Ten

Unveiling the micro-politics of the national QA system reform and implementation gap

10.0. Introduction

Chapters eight and nine signposted various issues that potentially affect implementation and outcome of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi. This chapter provides a fine-grained account of how and in what ways the QA system regulated by NCHE had been perceived and responded to by actors within universities and structural factors constituting the implementation gap based on views of respondents at three case HEIs. This answered research question number five: How do HEIs in Malawi respond to NCHE QA mechanism and what structural factors constitute the implementation gap? Teelken (2012, 2015) theorisation of university actors three coping mechanism: 'symbolic compliance', 'professional pragmatism' and 'formal instrumentality' was used to interpret university actors' response to the QA mechanism. The chapter is organized in three major sections. The first section discusses themes about how actors within HEIs perceived the national QA system. The second section explicates how they responded. The structural factors contributing to the implementation gap are examined in the last section.

10.1. Perceptions of actors within universities on the national QA system

Attempts to capture how various actors within universities perceive the national QA system has potential to optimise the outcomes of the QA implementation processes (Gallagher 2014). Interviews with senior university managers, academic unit managers and ordinary academic staff at the three case HEIs revealed that respondents generally perceived that the key principle of having NCHE as the national QA agency responsible for regulating standards in higher education was necessary. However, some had difficulties with how the design of the QA system was conceptualized; the standards that had been developed and how the system was being implemented. The critical issues were discussed in five themes: (1) awareness of the QA systems design and role of NCHE; (2) Minimum standards for higher education; (3) 'Fairness' and 'strictness' of NCHE QA processes; (4) NCHE peer review system; and (5) bureaucratic, expensive and too much paperwork.

10.1.1. Awareness of the QA system design and role of NCHE

There was generally little awareness and understanding of the national QA system design and role and mandate of NCHE among various actors interviewed at the three HEIs. One dean

stressed that NCHE was a new phenomenon in Malawi's higher education system and they were still trying to understand what it was doing because "the basis for accrediting and not accrediting institutions was sometimes not clearly understood" (CS3-PubU-Dean02). Fourteen respondents raised critical issues about the peer review system, voluntary versus mandatory QA system, institutional audits versus accreditation which constitute fundamental choices when designing the QA system (Hoosen et al., 2018). It was clear that they could not understand the rationality that informed the QA system design. The dominant view was that NCHE needed to engage more with institutions for people to understand the QA system and what was expected of HEIs actors. One registrar stated:

> There is still need for a lot of sensitizations to clarify the role and mandate of NCHE. I remember our members of staff raised a lot of issues about NCHE as a regulator that made us really struggle to accept NCHE. Are they here to give licenses? Are they here to regulate? Are they here to advise institutions? Is it advisory? All those issues need to be clarified so that everybody is clear about the role of NCHE apart from the fact that they are a government entity and we need to abide by what they say (CS3-PubU-R).

When probed, participants attributed their lack of understanding to three broad issues: lack of inclusiveness of NCHE policy processes; communication and information sharing; and constituency building or sense-making policy dialogue.

10.1.1.1. Lack of inclusiveness of NCHE policy development processes

Chapter seven indicated that senior university managers were actively engaged by NCHE in policy development while academic unit managers (deans and heads of department) and ordinary academic staff had very little opportunity for input into the design of the national QA system. Thus, while senior university managers demonstrated greater understanding of the QA system, few academic unit managers and ordinary academic staff indicated that they understood how NCHE works primarily because they had been engaged by NCHE as peer reviewers. Many others stated that they were only aware of some NCHE standards and tools due to their role of providing data for accreditation assessment but did not have a clear understanding of the nature of the QA system.

10.1.1.2. General lack of communication and information sharing

The other prominent issues expressed by seven academic staff was the general lack of communication and information sharing. It emerged that when NCHE has developed its instruments, they were sent to universities through offices of the vice chancellor and college

principals, which were expected to relay to relevant offices, particularly the registrar, QA directors and deans of faculty to disseminate to academics, students and other staff. However, some responsible officers could not trickle down the policy documents to academic staff. In other cases, policy documents were circulated to staff by the QA director through emails without the two-way process of generating and negotiating meaning to assist staff in their sense-making efforts (CS2-PubU-QAD).

10.1.1.3. Constituency building and sense-making policy dialogue issue.

Most contentious was the issue of constituency building and sense-making policy dialogue. Constituency building involves policy managers mobilizing support by marketing and promoting policy reform to make policy change both understandable and appealing to various stakeholders. This compliments and amplifies the legitimation of the policy reform by aiming not only at a gaining acceptance but also at institutionalizing policy change (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002). Vettori & Loukkola (2013) dealing with engagement issues in QA across European universities observed that QA was a highly contested issue and argued that regular two-way communication and policy dialogue for generating and negotiating meaning was fundamental in assisting university stakeholders in their sense making efforts to build shared understanding and responsibility.

Most academic unit managers and academic staff claimed that NCHE officials derided critical policy dialogue with university actors, which limited their understanding of the national QA system. They also claimed NCHE hardly prioritised the merits in perspectives of critics as an opportunity to improve the QA system. Seven of them, explained that before NCHE started accrediting institutions in 2016, NCHE officials visited few HEIs to talk about their mandate, QA standards, instruments and processes and give people a chance to ask questions. However, the meetings did not proceed in other institutions and were replete with tensions and confrontations due to failure by NCHE officials to engage in critical dialogue and clarify on what some university actors perceived were flaws in the design of the QA system. One professor attested:

> The first time we had NCHE representatives they came to explain their policy instruments and processes. It was a meeting with Heads and Deans. So, it was Dr X from NCHE. People were asking so many questions, which she could not answer. People were highlighting several anomalies. There were too many things. It was so problematic. When she left, she said she will never come again (CS3-PubU-Prof).

However, four officials at NCHE and three at Ministry of Education believed that the QA system design, standards and procedures were technically sound and interpreted any critical dialogue with university actors as *'negative attitude' or 'resistance to change'*. Two officials claimed that the design of the QA system and role of NCHE were not the problem. Rather, HEIs had been autonomous and they "have had challenges with NCHE just because they were not ready to meet the minimum standards and wanted to be doing things in their own way" (MoEST 01). They argued that HEIs had a very negative attitude towards NCHE such that at times they would lodge complaints that were not genuine and take NCHE to court simply to frustrate its work. The others contended that the misunderstandings between NCHE and universities was mainly because "universities were rigid" (NCHE 01), implying resistant to change or "chose not to understand" (NCHE 02) to the extent that whenever NCHE brings up new QA procedures, they kept questioning all initiatives (MoEST 03).

Brinkerhoff & Crosby (2002) argued that policy managers should not assume that because policy instruments are technically correct, then support would automatically be forthcoming or that stakeholders would clearly understand that it is in their own best interest to support policy change. Thus, although the issue of awareness and understanding of the QA system was interpreted from different standpoints and that indeed there were cases of resistance aimed to frustrate NCHE's work, it was evident that this reflected broader issues of inclusiveness, constituency building and sense-making policy dialogue. The QA system and procedures were developed at national level without wider participation of academic managers and frontline academic staff. Yet there was hardly any "upfront communication strategy" (Materu, 2007) by NCHE to promote shared understanding with actors at local level within universities. This was cited among the major factors for university actors' reluctance towards the QA procedures.

10.1.2. Minimum quality standards for higher education

There was general acceptance among respondents interviewed at the three HEIs of the minimum standards developed by NCHE. However, some raised three critical issues namely: feasibility; overly prescriptive input-based standard; and lack of flexibility and respect for diversity.

10.1.2.1. Feasibility

Some respondents perceived that although universities and programmes were required to meet the minimum standards set by NCHE, or risk being discredited and deregistered, the 'minimum

standards' constituted 'ideal' standards that institutions could only strive to achieve. Three respondents (QA director, lecturer, and professor) pointed out that some of the standards were not realistic and that no university in Malawi could fulfil them. They cited the case of standards for academic staff mix of 20% to be professors, 40% senior lecturers, and 40% lecturers and students to staff ratio of 18:1, noting that the country did not provide conditions required for their successful implementation in both public and private universities.

10.1.2.2. Overly prescriptive input-based standards

The scope and design of the minimum standards was perceived to give too much emphasis on inputs neglecting outputs and outcomes. The NCHE official claimed the input-based standards design was informed by the local context, since most HEIs in Malawi did not have the necessary inputs to provide education of acceptable quality (NCHE 03). This could have also been because Malawi adopted practices from other African countries. National QA agencies in many African countries have adopted predominantly input-based standards (Hayward, 2006; Materu, 2007). The trade-off was that the QA system could not take a holistic view of quality that encompasses inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes (Prisacariu, 2015).

The Minimum standards were further considered overly prescriptive in the sense that they prescribed minute details of practices at micro-level in universities. For example, the standards by design prescribed the number of books per subject in the library, physical measurement of hostel rooms and bed space, and the size of classrooms, laboratories, doors, and windows (NCHE, 2015c). The prescriptive standards were construed by four respondents (vice chancellor, QA director, dean, and senior lecturer) as NCHE's attempt at micro-managing institutions. There was fear that if NCHE documents were followed to the latter, they would micro-manage the university (CS3-PubU-SnLect). The dean of faculty, noted that because NCHE prescribed practices at micro-level, this brought uncertainty on whether academic staff should listen to NCHE or the university senate on specific micro-level management of academic programmes. The QA director contended that with the rapid changing landscape of higher education having prescriptive standards was a challenge because it implied the standards would have to be revised too frequently to accommodate changing benchmarks. As she argued:

> Now Covid-19 has come in. So, we need to change these minimum standards again to accommodate the two metres sitting space. I think when they are being revised, they need to make them broader so that institutions can be able to accommodate themselves within the broad standards (CS2-PubU-QAD).

NCHE officials contended that the "nitty-gritty" guidelines were necessary to guide newly established private universities. The assumption was that many of them did not have capacity or knowledge of QA processes, hence the need to put everything in 'black and white' (NTWG01-Dean). The other view was that prescriptive standards were adopted to address the need for transparency and measuring the degree of compliance with an ideal value (NCHE 02). NCHE officials assumed that prescriptive standards would make the QA processes more objective. This echoed Materu (2007) who argued that the vagueness of broad QA standards of qualitative nature that employ terms such as 'appropriate to', 'suitable conditions for' or 'adequate for' the specific need, tend to leave the standards open to subjective interpretation, which may create difficulties to agree on the appropriate level of compliance and cast doubt on reviewer's judgments and ultimately the legitimacy of the QA system. Martin & Stella (2007) suggested the approach taken by NCHE was mostly adopted in newly established accreditation systems. But in systems with a long history of accreditation such as in Europe, standards were broad, generic and non-prescriptive and mostly relied on judgement of professional reviewers (Kohoutek, 2009b; Prisacariu, 2015). Thus, while the position of NCHE officials was supported by some respondents, others contended that broad and relative standards were essential and preferable to those that prescribed specific micro-level details to ensure that universities adhere to same principles, while providing room to accommodate unique situations.

10.1.2.3. Flexibility and respect for diversity

The related issue concerned the flexibility of the national QA system and respect for diversity. There was a trade-off between the need to ensure objectivity and conformance to uniform standards, and the need to allow for diversity. NCHE adopted a single monolithic approach for all different types of HEIs in Malawi and the standards and assessment tools were the same for all institutional types. Six respondents, the senior academic manager and a lecturer at CS1-PvtU; senior lecturer, dean, and head of department at CS3-PubU; and lecturer and QA director at CS2-PubU used the metaphor "one size fits all approach" in contesting that the approach did not allow for diversity of institution types, mission and their unique ways of operating and lacked flexibility. There were claims that standards were designed to capture one fixed view, mainly the traditional set up of a public university, but were rigidly applied by NCHE reviewers to all institutions even when they did not apply to their situation. The vice chancellor for the private university gave an example that their institution had satellite centres, where non-traditional adult students attended programmes offered on weekend days. Yet NCHE reviewers insisted that satellite centres should have sporting facilities. He strongly argued that NCHE

needed to understand that universities were different and should not insist on things that were 'out of the roof', implying not relevant to the institution and the outcomes the university intended to achieve (CS1-PvtU-VC).

10.1.3. 'Fairness' and 'strictness' of NCHE accreditation processes

The other common themes revolved around the perception of fairness and varying strictness on how the standards were applied, which emerged as the precursor of tension between public and private universities. The vice chancellor, three deans, and an academic staff from the private university claimed that NCHE was biased and very hard on private universities, noting that the standards were applied on private universities very strictly compared to public universities. The main contention was that private universities in Malawi were newly established and needed more time and resources to fully invest in development of universities, hence it was unfair for NCHE to assess them at the same level as public universities, which had existed for a long period of time and were supported by government funding, which allowed them to have relatively more resources to build their capacity. Moreover, NCHE expected private universities at their inception to meet all prescribed standards fully and adequately, while being lenient on public universities. There were sentiments that NCHE officials and most of the NCHE reviewers came from public universities and what came into play when assessing public institutions was that they were lenient and did not want to embarrass each other. Despite that public universities could not adequately meet the prescribed standards; they were still passed and accredited (CS1-PvtU-VC).

On the contrary, four respondents, (vice chancellor, university registrar, head of department and academic staff) from public university perceived that NCHE was not strict in the way it approached accreditation processes. The key argument was that NCHE was registering and accrediting private universities that did not have the necessary requisite to provide quality education and could not meet the standards to be a university. The vice chancellor explained that "what is lacking is the state of strictness". NCHE appeared to be in dilemma to ensure quality control (prevent entry, discredit and de-register institutions that fail to meet standards) while promoting growth of newly established institutions that did not adequately meet the standards to increase access to higher education. This was believed to undermine the impact of the national QA system and accreditation processes (CS-PubU-VC).

The 'leniency' in the approach taken by NCHE certainly undermined the essence of quality control and the need to safeguard the public interest since the benchmarks for the academy were the same internationally and graduates from Malawi were not going to be evaluated differently. However, the perception of 'bias' appeared to be a serious and genuine concern. Kajawo & Dong (2020) similarly reported that 60% (n=129) of the respondents in their study of accreditation issues in private universities in Malawi indicated that NCHE was too much strict and unfair to private universities. At the same time, most private universities in Malawi except for a few that were affiliated to religious organizations were deemed not so competent compared to public universities and generally considered sub-standard because they did not have purposely built physical infrastructure and facilities but operated in shopping malls. This study provided evidence of dishonesty and attempts by some private universities to deceive NCHE reviewers that they have required resources to provide quality education simply to be registered or accredited. This might have contributed to alleged claims that NCHE unfairly targeted private universities. Similarly, arguments by respondents at public universities seemed disingenuous given that both public and private universities in Malawi were accredited with conditions. This meant institutions could not in various ways meet the standards set by NCHE, despite that public universities were much more developed than private universities. The evidence however, suggested that NCHE needed to closely monitor the tension between public and private universities and ensure that standards were fairly applied to all institutions.

10.1.4. NCHE Peer review system

10.1.4.1. Recruitment, composition, and expertise of reviewer panels

Martin (2011) posited that the appointment of reviewers to both a register of reviewers and to specific panels need to be handled professionally following clear criteria and procedures to enhance credibility of the QA processes. NCHE developed a database of reviewers, recruited through an open and objective process which is published on its website, where those who meet the criteria apply and are vetted by the Council. NCHE recruits those with a minimum of a master's degree and five years' experience of working in higher education and for academic reviewers, they should have attained the rank of senior lecturer. This approach was also followed in other countries such as the UK, Norway and Australia where the QA agency set-up the ongoing register of reviewers approved by the governing body of the agency (Martin, 2011).

However, respondents observed that when NCHE has constituted the reviewer panel, it does not initially send details of the proposed panel to the institution that would be assessed for

validation. The institutions were required to just receive the reviewer panel, yet in most cases they had concerns with the panels and in the extreme cases some reviewers were rejected by institutions on the day of site visit. The QA director at CS3-PubU, vice chancellor at CS1-PvtU and one national policy maker contended that NCHE must give room to institutions to validate the reviewers panel before they are deployed to institutions. The respondents' views were consistent with the practice in other countries such as South Africa, Lesotho, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda where the proposed team of reviewers is sent to the institution to be assessed to see if there was any serious objection against any one of them. If not, members are appointed to the expert team (IUCEA & DAAD, 2010). Yet it was doubtful that this could be practical for Malawi given the critical scarcity of competent academics and professionals who could serve as reviewers and the potential fear emphasised by some respondents that when NCHE reviewers are known in advance by institutions they could be bribed (CS3-PubU-R).

The respondents also raised concerns about the composition and expertise of reviewer panels that assessed their institutions, although the perspectives varied among the studied HEIs. On one hand, respondents at CS2-PubU recognized that the composition of reviewers had a good mixture of skills set with relevant expertise. Being a specialized institution that offers nursing and health related programmes, reviewer panels had expertise in medicine, nursing and education and involved both local and one international reviewer from Zambia (CS2-PubU-SnrLect01). NCHE also ensured that members of the nursing professional body served on the reviewer panels, which respondents appreciated. As one lecturer stated: "one thing I liked was that there were members from our professional regulatory body. They were part of the reviewer's team" (CS2-PubU-Lecturer). On the contrary, whilst NCHE officials indicated that CS1-PvtU university being the first institution to be assessed, they constituted "a very strong team of reviewers" composed of higher education managers, professors and "three reviewers from outside Malawi" (NCHE 02), the vice chancellor, two deans and one lecturer at CS1-PvtU contended that the team of reviewers was collectively of "high calibre" (CS1-PvtU-VC), implying 'strong team', but the reviewer panels for some faculties did not have expertise in particular programmes. The lecturer elaborated:

> Most of the people they sent to assess programmes were not experts in those programmes. They were just prominent people in the academia. In my faculty we had anthropology and social work programmes. They sent somebody from political science and another one from economics to assess these programmes. They did not comment anything on the two programmes but gave a lot of comments on the bachelor's degree in political science and bachelor's degree in economics programmes because these were their fields. So, for me I would say the team that

> came to our faculty lacked expertise in the subject areas they were assessing (CS1-PvtU-Lect-DC).

Similarly, respondents at CS3-PubU university revealed that the reviewer panels went about assessing programmes offered by different departments within a faculty even though they did not have expertise in the disciplines of some programmes. One dean stated.

> The composition of reviewers lacked in terms of expertise. The reviewers were not necessarily in the field they were assessing. They were probably saying because you are in the sciences, you can assess any science related programme (CS3-PubU-Dean01).

Another respondent mentioned that in some cases the reviewer panel allocated to assess programmes in a department had only one subject expert:

> "They had a single person who evaluated this department, but in this department, there are different areas of expertise, and some of them are very different and that person may not appreciate all those" (CS3-PubU-AsProf01).

This implied that whilst NCHE reviewers gave their viewpoints on all groups of degree programmes, they were only able to assess most programmes formally rather than professionally. The fate of the institution programmes could be in the hands of one panel member who assessed the programme as a discipline expert, thereby reducing other members to mere listeners, which raised fears that the decision of the panel could be compromised.

Five respondents (registrar, dean, head of department, QA director, and senior lecturer) at CS3-PubU, further pointed out that except for reviewers that assessed programmes in the faculty of law, the reviewer panels for other faculties were not considered the *primas inter pares.* There were claims that it sounded like a joke because many of the reviewers were former students at the college and some had graduated from the very programmes they were trying to assess (CS3-PubU-Dean02). Also, some postgraduate programmes offered at the institution were not offered anywhere else in Malawi and that academic staff at CS3-PubU had been the ones that developed most programmes and courses offered in other universities (CS3-PubU-SnrLect). This raised doubts about the value the reviewers appointed by NCHE could bring to the institution. The QA director stressed that: "It is important to have an external eye looking at what we do. But we want to hear from the voice that is authoritative" (CS3-PubU-QAD). Respondents strongly wished NCHE had used many international reviewers, yet NCHE prioritised foreign reviewers for programmes like law, medicine and engineering, where it was difficult to find local reviewers but generally engaged fewer international

reviewers when assessing other programmes due to high costs. This was a common problem in some African countries based on evidence from Ghana and Mauritius where cost implications made it impossible to engage a significant number of international reviewers forcing QA agencies to use only a few mainly from neighbouring African countries (Materu, 2007; Utuka, 2011).

10.1.4.2. Reviewers training and competence

The respondents at the three HEIs concurred with NCHE officials that when reviewers have been appointed, they are trained by NCHE. Besides the initial training, during the first day of site visit, they also have pre-review preparation where they go through the assessment tools and materials, although one stated "that the time for pre-review orientation was not adequate for reviewers to remember what had been covered during initial training" (CS2-PubU-AsProf). Despite this, respondents at CS3-PubU and CS1-PvtU raised concerns about the competence of reviewers. One registrar stated that: "for me I think there is still a gap in the sense that some of the reviewers that came were really not very competent in the areas they were assigned to do" (CS3-PubU-R). While reports for some reviewer panels were focused, comprehensive and with a lot of substance, for others they were too superficial and not helpful. The general impression was that some reviewers did not have capacity suggesting the training of reviewers and pre-review orientation was inadequate. Respondents who served as NCHE reviewers attested that some did not attend any training at all but simply the pre-review orientation that merely provided assessment tools and practical information about the process (CS1-PvtU-Dean01). The others claimed that the three to five days reviewer training conducted by NCHE was too short and shallow. The training focused on assessment tools and standards but did not ground reviewers in fundamental issues about QA. One member of NCHE technical working group conceded that NCHE mostly worked on the assumption that because reviewers were specialists in a discipline, they would have a good understanding of QA and be competent to review programmes. However, there was a need to ensure that training was comprehensive for reviewers to fully understand fundament issues about QA and appreciate their role in the QA system (NTWG01-Dean). This demonstrated that NCHE recognizes the importance of all potential reviewers to attend training. However, the trainings conducted during the first cycle were not comprehensive such that not all reviewers clearly understood what they were doing.

10.1.4.3. Reviewers conduct and professionalism

The conduct and professionalism of reviewers is a critical factor to the legitimacy and credibility of QA processes (Hou, et al., 2018). The reviewer panel and each member individually are generally expected to act independently, confidentially and without any conflict of interest and offer positive criticism with sincerity and with the interest of enhancing quality. Similar to other countries in Europe and Africa (ENQA, 2011; L. H. Martin, 2011) NCHE required members of the review panel to sign the code of conduct and there were several reported cases where reviewers had recused themselves, because they felt there was conflict of interest.

However, some respondents perceived that NCHE was not sensitive to internal national rivalries and competition between institutions of higher learning. The main issue was that institutions offering similar programmes competed for the same students. When institution A is offering a chemistry programme, to assess the programme NCHE relied on experts from institution B which offers a similar programme, and these were perceived to be competitors. This brought concerns that reviewers would deliberately highlight several problems for a programme not to be accredited so that students enrol in their university (CS3-PubU-SnrLect). On the contrary, the official at NCHE downplayed the problem, arguing that reviewers worked on behalf of NCHE and were appointed in their individual capacity based on their expertise and integrity and not necessarily their allegiance to any institution (NCHE 02). But one respondent at CS1-PvtU university gave an example of their Bachelor of social work programme, which some reviewers had tried to water down because they were intending to introduce a similar programme at their institution. The respondent complained that when the institution later introduced the programme, they noted that it was simply a copy and paste of their programme or plagiarism, but NCHE did not address those issues (CS1-PvtU-Lect-DC).

Slightly more respondents observed that some reviewer's attitudes were not sensitive to the need to be impartial and respectful throughout the process and could speak in a way that was demeaning and derogatory. One dean observed that "they had a mind that we are going to show them. They are going to fail" (CS1-PvtU-Dean02). Three respondents at CS2-PubU narrated an incident where the institution had misplaced the certification from the professional regulatory body that accredited their professional programmes. Instead of verifying the matter with the professional body, reviewers made "sarcastic remarks and threats alleging fraud and bribery" (CS2-PubU-QAD). The vice principal for CS2-PubU bemoaned her encounter with

NCHE reviewers stating that the reviewers conduct was "demeaning" and that even though they were experienced and might have been trained, "there was a certain element that was missing, something like integrity". She explained that

> It was like you say you have published, let us see your publications. Can you Google your name? [search your name on the internet]. Imagine in the library, google your name, and let us see what you have published? To me it was demeaning (CS2-PubU-VP).

The other respondent at private university observed that reviewers had the mind-set that they were coming from what they thought were the best institutions. They behaved like whatever other institutions were doing was wrong so long as "it did not conform to what they do in their own institutions" (CS1-PvtU-Dean02). Two respondents at public university concurred that panel members visited the institution with preconceived ideas about the institution and their programmes and therefore wished to impose their ideas and way of doing things on the institution. As one of them, a dean of faculty stated:

> I noted some conflict of interest, in that this one is coming from X university. He has his own way of doing things at his university. Then he comes here, they want to impose something that they have at their university that you must do it this way and that way. No! It should not be like that (CS3-PubU-Dean 01).

The respondents observed that because reviewers were sanctioned by NCHE, the institutions were bound to go by what they say. In effect, there was a danger of forcing institutions to do things that they do not believe in. When taken to the limit, this raised the question of academic freedom as lamented by one professor that "If we try to voice out that this is not what we believe in we are called rebels" (CS3-PubU-AsProf01). The other issue about reviewer's conduct related to the consistency in review decisions and assessment processes. Normally, the QA system must ensure that each institution or programme is evaluated in an equivalent way, even if the external reviewer panels are different (IUCEA & DAAD, 2010). However, two respondents, dean of faculty and academic staff (professor) at CS3-PubU claimed that there was lack of consistency in assessment processes. It appeared to them that each reviewer panel was doing what they thought was best for them. The assessment of some faculties and departments was very systematic. But in others they just hurried the process and ended up skipping certain critical aspects and missing some important information such that even after the exit meeting, reviewers kept going back to the institution almost four times requesting for more documents (CS3-PubU-Prof). The dean further recounted that:

> We had cases where the faculty of science has nearly the same programme documents in the sense that we develop them in the same way, the same manner

> and all that. But one programme document had been evaluated by one reviewer. The other document by another reviewer. The recommendations were different. One programme passed; the other programme did not pass. But we had similar conditions in all aspects (CS3-PubU-Dean01).

The two respondents concluded that the assessment process at their institution was somehow ‘chaotic’. As the dean put it: “If you ask me the assessment process was chaotic. I can tell you it was chaotic” (CS3-PubU-Dean01). When probed, respondents attributed this to lack of regulations that govern how the external review assessment should take place. They noted that the standards and accreditation framework used by NCHE did not provide formal written procedures of how reviewers should carry out their task from the time they arrive at the institution up to the end, yet the NCHE Act mandated NCHE to develop regulations to guide such processes. This was confirmed by two NCHE officials who indicated that they were still in the process of developing regulations. These findings on the NCHE peer review system demonstrated the fragility of the credibility attached to NCHE accreditation process and the possible damage that could be caused by reviewers who are not experts in their field, who are unprepared for the task and whose attitude and integrity is questionable. This supported the literature about the need to ensure that reviewers are experts in the subject area or discipline, have no conflict of interest, receive adequate training and that their reports are comprehensive with precisely stated evidence-based recommendations.

10.1.5. Bureaucratic, expensive and too much paperwork

NCHE accreditation process and requirements were perceived to be too expensive, demanding too much paper work and bureaucratic, which echoed myriad studies conducted in other countries (Carson, 2019; Pham, 2018; Utuka, 2011).

10.1.5.1. Too expensive

Most respondents at the three HEIs stated that the preparation for accreditation put a lot of financial stress on the institution. Some lamented that, “when they say they are coming to assess the institution, it is not easy. The institution pumps in more money to make sure that we put everything in order” (CS2-PubU-SnrLect01). One dean at public university concurred that: “A lot of money was pumped in just to get ready for NCHE” (CS2-PubU-Dean). A dean at private university also testified that “we had to make sure that all things that were not there were bought and put in place and this put a huge strain on our budget” (CS1-PvtU-Dean03). The general impression was that because NCHE requirements were non-negotiable, institutions were forced

to meet them regardless of whether they have resources or not. This brought a burden on institutions since they had to adjust their budgets to finance or meet the requirement of the QA system without any additional funding.

10.1.5.2. Too much paperwork

NCHE QA mechanism were perceived to have brought heavy workload and too much paperwork: "the coming of NCHE has added a lot of workload and paperwork, which is so tedious" (CS1-PvtU-Dean02). The registrar at CS1-PvtU university recalled their experience that people could not knock off up to 10 pm or 12 mid-night working tirelessly to develop tools and documents that would be required by NCHE. The thinking was that if they cannot do more, it means the institution and programmes would not be accredited (CS1-PvtU-R). The QA director at CS2-PubU similarly indicated that they had "to make sure that every department has policy documents to support whatever activities that are done in the department" (CS2-PubU-QAD). This required a lot of paperwork such that the process was described as "kind of a nightmare and exhausting" (CS2-PubU-SnrLect02). Thus, although sixteen respondents viewed documentation of their practices as the significant contribution of the national QA system in the previous chapter, they also raised concerns about increased workload and some construed that paperwork rather than improvement of actual practices appeared to be the dominant concern of NCHE.

10.1.5.3. More bureaucratic

NCHE QA mechanisms were considered more bureaucratic, primarily focused on enforcing compliance and penalizing institutions rather than being facilitative and improvement oriented. Fourteen respondents (six senior university managers, three academic managers (deans) and five academic staff) at the three HEIs used terms 'policing', 'fault-finding', 'witch-hunting', 'police dog' and 'watch-dog' to describe the stringent bureaucratic approach of NCHE. One dean lamented that:

> NCHE should stop policing institutions. It is not a policing agency. They can do better by engaging institutions. They should be able to be more supportive to institutions than being more of policing (CS3-PubU-Dean02).

The dominant view was that NCHE predominantly focused on fault finding instead of helping institutions on how to uplift standards and improve quality of teaching and learning. The approach was like "we want to check if you have this and whether you are doing this right or not, and if there is any mistake or some inconsistency with prescribed standards, it could cost

the institution's accreditation" (CS1-PvtU-Dean01). NCHE reviewers could assess things that were not in the self –assessment report or mentioned by staff and students, but simply because NCHE heard rumours about certain practices that allegedly happen at the institution. This was interpreted that NCHE seemed to have hidden agendas more like 'witch-hunting' (CS3-PubU-Dean01). Taken together these issues were believed to "take away the whole essence of peer review" which ought to focus on improvement (CS3-PubU-R).

"NCHE thrived on threatening institutions that if they do not comply with standards, they would not be accredited, instead of engaging institutions to build trust and ownership" (CS1-PvtU-SnrLect). The NCHE official admitted that universities in Malawi were threatened by NCHE. "Even the vice chancellor who was an external reviewer, when NCHE goes to assess their institution, they would start sweating, claiming the hunter was being hunted" (NCHE 01). Five senior university managers, two academic unit managers and one academic staff at the three HEIs observed that this created anxiety and uncertainty for institutions to be subjected to external assessment by NCHE. There was evidence that respondents felt threatened by NCHE due to their own recognition that the institutions could not meet the standards. One dean at CS2-PubU attested that when dates were announced that NCHE would be assessing the institution, members of staff were afraid about what would happen, having identified some shortfalls after self-assessment following NCHE standards (CS2-PubU-Dean). As the registrar elaborated:

> The feeling was that of anxiety and panic to say following these standards we may fail here and there. Now we have built a reputation for many years since 1979. If NCHE publishes in the papers that we went to assess this college. They have failed accreditation. That would be an embarrassment. So, the anxiety and panic were within that context to say by any means let us not fail this (CS2-PubU-R).

There were also indications that the absence of quality culture in universities and lack of understanding of the nature of the QA system contributed to fear and anxiety, which made some members of staff to misconstrue NCHE QA processes as fault finding with the intention of penalising institutions. Nevertheless, most respondents claimed that the use of threats by NCHE was counterproductive since the "institutions might have things on paper but not implement them when NCHE was not there" (CS1-PvtU-SnrLect). At CS3-PubU one respondent admitted that when NCHE went to assess the institution, they were ready to show that they were doing a good job. "But when NCHE left people went back to their usual kind of things" (CS3-PubU-Snrlect-DC). Two respondents (dean and senior lecturer) at CS2-PubU repeatedly using expressions, "for the sake that NCHE was coming" and "because they said NCHE was coming"

explained that staff were on request from university management required to have policy documents and vision and mission statements, organograms, timetables and academic work plans displayed on their office notice boards at least during the days of external assessment by NCHE to create the impression that everyone made use of them, yet in practice academic staff had for a long time hardly had access to university policy documents (CS2-PubU-SnrLect02).

This suggested that the more bureaucratic the approach, the greater was the risk of 'game playing' (Harvey & Newton, 2004) where institutions primarily focus on learning the 'rules of the game' to attaining accreditation, without necessarily and subsequently striving to continually improve their practices to enhance quality. Thus, most respondents underscored that NCHE needed to build trust with institutions and embrace a more facilitative role that can help to build capacity of universities to focus on quality enhancement.

10.2. Responses of university actors to the national QA system procedures

Taking an 'appreciative' rather than 'correctionist' position and rejecting the dualism of 'resistance' versus 'compliance' to provide a critical explanation of university actors responses, the study found that participants at the three HEIs responded to the QA regime in divergent ways. The responses were conditioned by an interplay between multiple structural factors and agential social actions and evoked Teelken (2012, 2015) three coping strategies. 'Formal instrumentality' reflected responses at CS2-PubU public university, whilst participants at CS1-PvtU private university responded through 'professional pragmatism' and the clearest pattern of responses at CS2-PubU public university was 'symbolic compliance'.

10.2.1. Formal instrumentality

Respondents views at CS2-PubU public university characterised 'formal instrumentality', implying the acceptance and reliance on formal external QA mechanisms without a critical perspective (Teelken, 2012). The dominant view was that: "we have always been subjected to similar processes by the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi. Why would we say no to NCHE?" (CS2-PubU-Dean). Three senior university managers, two academic unit managers and four academic staff stated that they did not have serious problems with the NCHE QA regime and neither was there any resistance at their institution. A sample view was that:

> As an institution we strive to achieve NCHE minimum standards and there is no resistance from academics here. I would say we accept the direction and advice of NCHE (CS2-PubU-HOD)

The study found that CS2-PubU was historically regulated by the professional regulatory body. As a specialized institution that offered nursing and midwifery and health related programmes, it was both mandatory and part of professional culture for the institution to be accredited and for graduate students and faculty to be licensed and regulated by the professional agency. There was an overlap between NCHE and the professional agency standards and processes. This confirmed one professor's sentiments that NCHE did not bring anything new that was contrary to what the institution had already been doing (CS2-PubU-AsProf). Henkel (2000, 2005) stressed the dynamics between individuals, disciplinary culture, and the university within which academic identities are formed and sustained as very important when considering responses to policy change. Based on the historical legacy and disciplinary culture of being subjected to external regulation, respondents believed that having the external QA agency was necessary to provide 'checks and balance' which acted as a form of motivation that helped the institution to improve quality (CS2-PubU-QAD), comparability of standards, international recognition and graduate employability (CS2-PubU-HoD). One lecturer stressed that it was the "professional role of academic staff to support NCHE and embrace its QA procedures" (CS2-PubU-Lect). It was not surprising that respondents at CS2-PubU were more likely to comply with NCHE QA mechanisms without a critical perspective, which echoed Luckett (2007) in South Africa that institutions that historically had a culture of external regulatory compliance were more likely to accept state QA regulation as legitimate.

10.2.2. Professional pragmatism

Teelken (2012) described 'professional pragmatism' as the more realistic, down to earth approach that deals with external QA mechanisms in a critical but serious manner. The respondents at CS1-PvtU private university demonstrated more subtle and nuanced resistance but seriously dealt with NCHE QA procedures. Academic staff compliance was mixed with resistance strategies such as "slowness in implementing procedures and recommendations from NCHE". This was interpreted as the "sign of not being happy with what was happening" (CS1-PvtU-Dean 01). In discussions, they believed NCHE was in some cases "not thinking and doing right", but being a private university, it was difficult to completely resist or "say no" to what NCHE prescribed because by doing so the institution and/or programmes could be discredited and deregistered and that could potentially mean loss of their jobs (CS1-PvtU-VC). The combination of fear of being discredited or deregistered and the need to establish the institution's social status/reputation by being recognized and accredited with the economic motive of maximising returns from increased student enrolment, appeared more important than

their normative motives of complying with NCHE QA mechanisms because of the sense of moral agreement that it enhanced quality. One lecturer at CS1-PvtU explained:

> We implement these things because we are seeking accreditation which is directly linked to the number of students we can enrol depending on the market. Public universities may not abide by NCHE standards because they already have a name. For us we are trying to establish the status and our reputation is in infancy. Our programmes have to strictly abide by NCHE standards (CS1-PvtU-Lecturer-DC).

The dean of faculty concurred that the institution was the first to be assessed for accreditation by NCHE in Malawi because they "wanted to make a statement that it was a well-established university". The belief was that this would bring more trust to parents and the public that they enrol their students with the university (CS1-PvtU-Dean01). Being a private university that relied on student fees, this perhaps explained the pragmatic approach taken where the NCHE QA regime threatened continuity or stability of programmes.

The other profound issue linked to agential social action was that although HEIs shared certain governance structures prescribed by NCHE, there were few but relevant differences between CS1-PvtU private university and the two public institutions. This further influenced how participants responded to NCHE QA procedures. Two quotes from a head of department and senior lecturer at CS1-PvtU illustrate the point:

> I have not had the encounter whereby some lecturers are trying to resist the procedures from NCHE. This is because if the university sees that you do not comply with the procedures, they do not renew your contract (CS1-PvtU-HoD).
>
> To say the truth most of the things that we do is because we fear administrators. They go around in classes to check and strictly monitor how you are teaching. There is nothing that we do because of we want to please NCHE. We are on contract and if you do not follow the standards, you can be easily fired (CS1-PvtU-SnrLect).

The managerial practices at CS1-PvtU university gave high priority to hierarchy, consistent with new public management compared to the two public institutions where academics relatively enjoyed some autonomy. Also, unlike at the two public institutions where staff were mostly employed on tenure, all staff at CS1-PvtU were engaged on fixed-term contract employment. The institution had a central executive structure of Director of Academic Affairs with more power to control and regulate work on deans, heads of department and academic staff. The implication was that deans, heads of department and academics to some extent

complied with NCHE QA mechanisms endorsed by senior management out of fear that any contrary response might lead to termination or non-renewal of employment contracts.

10.2.3. Symbolic compliance

Respondents at CS3-PubU public university developed symbolic compliance to NCHE QA mechanisms. This implies pretension of enthusiasm and critical resistance in which respondents only adapted to policy change at a superficial or cosmetic level (Teelken, 2012). The study found that respondents did not want to be subjected to external regulation by NCHE in the first place. The external QA system was just forced on them. Six of them stated that for the greater part, they were doing it simply to comply with NCHE as a matter of law. One quote from the registrar would suffice:

> I think the greater part is that staff comply because it is law. Given a chance, the way I heard people critiquing the NCHE system, they would say to hell with NCHE. The College Principal kept on repeating to people that whether we like it or not we have to do what NCHE says. NCHE is a legal entity. It has a mandate through an Act of Parliament. It is a law. Nobody is above the law. We must comply. So, for me basically people are doing it because it is a law (CS3-PubU-R).

Lucas (2014) in the UK and Luckett (2007) in South Africa observed that historically, autonomous institutions with strong liberal and collegial cultures and elite-research-intensive where forms of symbolic capital are high tend to have a tradition and culture of resistance and critical engagement. CS3-PubU being the oldest public university college and a historically autonomous institutions with strong liberal and collegial cultures had never been regulated by an external body and it was very critical about the national QA system. Most respondents contended that the institution had a robust internal system of quality control that subjected academic programmes to a rigorous evaluation through university senate committees. The metaphor "If it is not broken, don't try to fix it" was used to justify that the system of quality control by the university senate was an old tradition, but it was still working, such that there was enough quality checking within the university, which made external assessment by NCHE redundant (CS3-PubU-AsProf01).

Ironically, two respondents (professor and senior lecturer) revealed that there was an "entrenched laisse-faire culture" at CS3-PubU, where some senior academic staff hardly followed institutional procedures and regulations regarding their professional responsibilities. Managing personal businesses and research consultancy firms often took precedence over

college core activities (CS3-PubU-SnrLect-DC). The professor opined that some academic staff were very critical and resisted NCHE for its own sake due to perceived fear that the external surveillance would expose them (CS3-PubU-Prof).

On the contrary, the QA director, two deans and three academic staff interpreted the critical resistance as the "yearning desire to do things right" (CS3-PubU-Dean01). They observed that NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 had several anomalies that needed to be rectified before rolling out the national QA system. The other issue was that they were not convinced about the capacity of NCHE and its reviewers to evaluate and accredit institutions legitimately and credibly. The institution together with the governments Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) had been responsible for accrediting universities before the establishment of NCHE in 2011, hence they had reservations with NCHE's dependence on reviewers from the same universities they had been regulating (CS3-PubU-QAD).

For one dean and two senior lecturers, NCHE QA mechanisms were not viewed as a tool for quality improvement. Accreditation by NCHE was considered the 'one-off activity' that brought limited changes and improvement (CS3-PubU-SnrLect-DC). Moreover, respondents claimed NCHE did not have a real effect and lacked enforcement mechanisms for its accreditation decisions. This was based on their observations that once accreditation decisions are made there was hardly any follow-up by NCHE such that unaccredited or discredited universities continued operating and programmes that failed accreditation would still run and enrol students in some universities. For them, while NCHE could be a tool for ensuring quality assurance, this could only be a step in the right direction, but it had not reached a point where they could say the system was working. The attempts to improve quality were better initiated from the university itself and not forced by an external agency exerting its influence from outside (CS3-PubU-Dean02). It was possible the critical resistance might have been disruptive and that respondents at CS3-PubU might have been hiding being loopholes in the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 to avoid NCHE's external QA mechanisms. But they also raised critical issues that seemed to reify the NCHE QA system, suggesting the key principle of having NCHE was not the problem, rather respondents had difficulties with the design of the QA system and how it was being implemented. This contributed to symbolic compliance where respondents embraced QA mechanisms 'cosmetically' simply to comply with the law.

The implication was that contrary to NCHE's ambition of establishing formal QA processes as the core value of HEIs, it appeared some institutions merely complied with the accreditation processes in order to fulfil the law but did not embrace national QA processes as a mechanism for enhancing quality. As Pham (2018) argued, the benefits of external reviews depend on how the evaluated institution is committed to improvement. As long as the university perceive that it was forced to do accreditation, it could continue to engage in superficial compliance with external accreditors. A related concern was the tendency of "window-dressing", when the university believes that gaining an accreditation certificate would give them some advantage of external image. In this case the impact of external evaluation on improvement of quality tend to be limited (Pham, 2018).

10.3. Structural factors associated with the implementation gap

Apart from issues already discussed the "implementation gap" defined as the difference between the planned outcome or intentions of the QA system and the actual outcome of implementation process (Agasisti et al., 2019) was further exacerbated by three main structural issues: funding, human capacity, and multiple uncoordinated HE legal frameworks.

10.3.1. Inadequate funding

Inadequate financial resources for NCHE to effectively carry out its functions and for HEIs to adequately meet quality standards and implement recommendations for improvement made by NCHE reviewers significantly contributed to the implementation gap. As stated elsewhere NCHE depends on government funding as a subvented statutory body, although it gets some funding from international donors and income generated through fees. Five officials at NCHE indicated that while budget estimates were made as accurately as possible, with the harsh economic realities, they were normally cut by government treasury, such that funding allocated to NCHE by government always fell short of its annual budget. This made it difficult for NCHE to discharge all its mandated QA functions, but only prioritised few core activities tailored to its unique financial situations.

The problem of funding at NCHE created a complex symbiotic relationship with HEIs. Two officials at NCHE explained that the entire burden of costs of the assessment exercise for registration and accreditation of institutions and programmes, was borne by HEIs which paid a fixed application fee and the actual total cost of hiring external reviewers invoiced by NCHE based on the number of programmes, plus 20% of the total cost as administration fees. Since

more external reviewers were required to carry out programme accreditation due to the large number of programmes offered by institutions, respondents at the three HEIs stated that accreditation fees were very costly, and this was discouraging institutions from applying to be assessed for accreditation by NCHE.

Materu (2007) observed that without adequate funding at university level there was very little chance that implementation of the national QA system would have the desired impact. The lack of adequate funding for both public and private universities was a common problem in Malawi (Msiska, 2016; Valeta et al., 2016). At university level, HEIs budgets hardly included funding allocation for the QA Unit or Directorate of QA. The QA directors at the three HEIs stated that QA was mostly considered a cross-cutting issue such that universities did not have specific budget allocation for QA, which affected the operations of QA offices. Similarly, all respondents interviewed at the three HEIs indicated that they had difficulties to implement some recommendations for improvement made by NCHE reviewers due to financial constraints, a situation also observed in both public and private universities in Ghana (Utuka, 2011, 2012) and Vietnam (Pham, 2018).

This resonated with studies in many other African countries, such as Ghana (Okae-Adjei, 2016; Seniwoliba & Yakubu, 2015), Ethiopia (Kahsay, 2012) and Mozambique (Zavale et al., 2016) which indicated that the cost involved in QA was often higher than the available funding and this has remained the major challenge for implementation of QA systems at national and institutional level (Hayward, 2006; Materu, 2007; Okoche, 2017). This showed that efforts to effectively implement the national QA system in Malawi were undermined by funding to the extent that some of the expected improvement after external review by NCHE were less likely to happen in universities, thereby posing difficulties to achieve the purposes of the national QA system. Also, although government, donors and NCHE accreditation fees supported the burden of the QA system, questions regarding the 'how' and 'who' should pay whether the government, the HEIs themselves or donors was far from being solved.

10.3.2. Human resource capacity

The need to have adequate and highly qualified technical staff in QA issues at the national QA agency and within HEIs has been acknowledged (Okoche, 2017). NCHE faced a serious problem of inadequate personnel and lacked professional staff with adequate training in QA to carry out the duties of the council. Two KI at NCHE and two at the Ministry of Education

stressed that NCHE was greatly overwhelmed due to the limited number of available staff. They noted that the NCHE's core Department of Quality Assurance and Accreditation had two sections: the operations and academic sections, but with only four members of staff. NCHE staff had to always cope with overwhelming cycle of assessment with the increasing number of private universities seeking either registration or accreditation (NCHE 01). This made them unable to carry out other functions, such as follow-up monitoring visits after accreditation.

Materu (2007) stressed that within the early stages of a national QA agency as was the case for Malawi, senior agency staff require two set of skills: the skills for conceptualising appropriate QA systems and development of methodologies and procedures; and skills for implementation of QA processes. However, two officials at NCHE, including the former Chairperson of the Board indicated that most of the senior staff at NCHE were appointed for having many years of teaching and research experience in universities and did not have formal training and adequate knowledge of formal QA systems. They have had to learn about QA systems on the job, through reading, attending workshops, and visiting established QA agencies in other countries. This was the trend in most African countries where senior agency staff had limited or no knowledge about QA at the time of appointment (Hayward, 2006; Materu, 2007; Msiska, 2016). The impact of inadequate QA expertise was that NCHE had difficulties to adapt standards drawn from elsewhere to the local context of Malawi and somewhat derided critical dialogue with stakeholders. Two officials at NCHE and several respondents from HEIs mentioned the incident where the senior manager at NCHE literally broke down during policy dialogue when stakeholders were highlighting anomalies with the national QA system.

NCHE relies on peer review system that draws external reviewers from HEIs to carry out its duties. However, most of the times it was difficult for NCHE to get external reviewers with appropriate qualifications and in sufficient numbers to do the job. This was attributed to the general problem of human resources capacity within Malawi where "most people have qualifications and skills that are not in demand or needed" (NCHE 02). The problem of human capacity with expertise in QA was also evident at university level. This was believed to affect the institutionalisation of formal QA processes within universities. One respondent stated:

> When we talk about the issue of capacity, we should not just focus on NCHE but also on higher education institutions. We produced the self-assessment in preparation for accreditation by NCHE. I do not think that we have ever conducted institutional audits. One of the major reasons is capacity. I hope NCHE can help us to build capacity of institutions to conduct institutional audits (NTWG01-Dean).

While some HEIs had established QA units or directorates to comply with NCHE, similar to experiences in Ethiopia (Kahsay 2012) and Ghana (Okae-Adjei, 2016; Seniwoliba & Yakubu, 2015), the QA units were mostly ill-equipped with only one officer to undertake QA activities. The officer was usually a senior academic staff with either a master's degree or PhD academic qualification but not related to QA. This posed a challenge to fully discharge the functions of the QA Directorate or Units such that the QA Directors only carried out limited functions. Thus, the issue of human capacity in terms of technical knowledge/skills and number of personnel contributed to the implementation gap at national and university level.

10.3.3. Multiple uncoordinated higher education legal frameworks

The lack of a comprehensive higher education legal framework was another major obstacle to implementation of the QA system for higher education in Malawi. Higher education since 1965 had been regulated by policy prescriptions in national development plans and separate Acts of Parliament that establish public universities. This meant the sub-sector had been historically fragmented and uncoordinated. However, most recent reforms involved government enacting numerous regulatory laws for higher education. There is the NCHE Act of Parliament No 15 of 2011 that established the QA agency; the Higher Education Students Loans and Grants Board (HESLGB) Act of Parliament No 2 of 2015; six separate Acts of Parliament for public universities; and at the time of this study the government had been working on the Malawi Qualification Authority (MAQA) Bill.

Ten respondents (three officials at NCHE, one at Ministry of Education, four from HEIs, one from civil society, and one NCHE technical working group member) observed that most of these regulatory laws were to a larger extent not harmonized to achieve a coordinated system and this was a source of regulatory tension. Two incidents are worth mentioning. At the time of this study, CS2-PvtU private university, had two cohorts of students that had finished their studies for the award of a Bachelor of Laws Degree, but could not graduate because the law programme was not accredited. NCHE could not proceed to accredit the law programme because it was awaiting the amendment of the Legal Education and Legal Practitioners Act of Parliament No. 31 of 2018, which previously restricted provision of legal education to one public university. Also, as indicated before, NCHE's mandate to regulate higher education overlapped with the mandate given to University Council and Senate by Acts of Parliament that establish public universities. This situation existed in other countries in Africa and had

been the main point of misunderstanding between national QA agencies and public universities (Hayward, 2006; Materu, 2007). It was evident that unless laws governing the higher education sector were harmonized, regulatory tensions would continue to affect implementation of the QA system.

10.4. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that most participants at the three HEIs generally perceived that the key principle of having the formal QA system and NCHE as the external QA agency responsible for regulating quality and higher education was necessary. However, they had difficulties with how the design of the QA system was conceptualised; the standards that were developed and how the system was being implemented. Among the dominant issues included lack of awareness and understanding among university actors of the QA system design, role and mandate of NCHE; the prescriptive monolithic approach or methods of practice adopted by NCHE that lacked flexibility and respect for diversity; the composition, competence and professionalism of reviewers; more managerial and bureaucratic national QA system that primarily focused on enforcing compliance and penalising institutions rather than being facilitative and improvement oriented; and that the structural conditions required to successfully implement national QA system were not present at both national and university level including adequate funding, human resource capacity; and the comprehensive higher education law that could ensure a unified and coordinated system. Overall, respondents at the three HEIs' responded to the QA regime in divergent ways largely shaped by structural factors unique to the institutions. But the responses suggested that contrary to NCHE's ambition of establishing formal QA processes as the core value of HEIs, some merely complied with the accreditation processes as a way of fulfilling the law and did not embrace QA processes as a mechanism for enhancing quality culture. This significantly contributed to the implementation gap. This suggested that actors within universities do not mutely accept policy reform. The achievement of outcomes for the national QA system was significantly a localised context-specific process, that requires seriously attending to actors at the micro-level within universities as both 'makers' and 'shaper' of QA system reforms.

Chapter Eleven
Conclusion and contribution of the study

11.0. Introduction

This education policy research aimed to explore and understand how the national quality assurance (QA) system for higher education in Malawi that emerged with the formation of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) by the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 had been developed within the globalising environment of QA reforms; how it was being implemented; the influence it was having in the higher education sector; and the extent to which it could be argued that the nature of policy development processes had implications on the implementation of the QA system and consequently its overall outcomes or effect. NCHE Act No 15 of 2011 and subsequent QA standards and frameworks developed by NCHE constituted an ensemble of 'policy instruments' or 'policy texts' steering the national QA system for higher education in Malawi, which the study examined. The study took a macro (system) level analysis of the QA system for higher education with NCHE as the primary case study and principal focus of investigation, while three HEIs: one private and two public, formed secondary case studies to provide 'views from below' and maximize what could be learnt about the implementation and influence of the national QA system procedures within universities.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section restates the key analytical interest, theoretical framework and research questions for the study. Section two summarizes the main conclusions of the study based on the research questions, which reflect the different aspects of the QA system development trajectory. Section three explicates the contribution of the study. Section four outlines the limitation of the study and suggestions for further research. Finally, section five makes suggestions for improving policy and practice.

11.1. Key analytical focus, theoretical framework and research questions

Chapter one provided broader issues that initially elicited interest for this study and formed the key analytical focus. First, although QA occupies a central place in higher education policy globally, the research literature revealed that it was both a theoretical and practical challenge to develop and implement an effective QA system for higher education especially, where QA reforms are informed by global imperatives such that globally the search for the most satisfying QA system was ongoing (Harvey & Williams, 2010b).

Second, with formal QA systems for higher education being a recent phenomenon in African countries (Materu, 2007), the dominant claim was that the development of QA policies in many developing countries of Africa and Asia was heavily influenced by QA models in the US and Europe, although the extent to which the imported model from Western countries were effective to the specific context of developing countries varied greatly such that in some cases it had proved unsuccessful (Shah & Do, 2017). Chapter two argued that contemporary global transformations have led to the 'rescaling' of education polity in which internationalized QA frameworks and 'best practices' are increasingly enacted in supranational (global/international) and 'transnational' (regional) policy spaces. Nation states when developing QA systems for higher education, inevitably look 'outward' towards supranational and transnational QA models; to other countries for prevailing norms and practices and 'inward' towards national practices (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011). Policy studies should examine the extent that QA models and frameworks from elsewhere are translated and recontextualised in specific national contexts (Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014).

Third, despite that QA agencies and their procedures are widely recognized and respected internationally, it was not universally agreed that the adoption of formal QA systems produces desirable effects in universities. While some argued despite problems 'the net effect was positive', others contended that formal QA systems do not produce substantial effects particularly on enhancing quality of teaching and learning apart from instilling bureaucratic requirements (Newton, 2010). Chapter three showed that the matter of who defines quality; determines the purpose and controls the QA system; and designs standards and criteria for quality evaluation forms the key issue. One fundamental premise was that QA reform in higher education is both a technical and political process driven by competing values, be it 'collegial rationality' based on academic values and norms of quality teaching and learning held by disciplines; 'managerial rationality' that equates formal QA to 'good management' requiring senior university managers to design and control QA processes; and 'bureaucratic rationality' based on norms and values linked to accountability, compliance, student (customer) protection and graduates employability held by government and quality agencies (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Luckett, 2006b, 2007b). The direction for reform was that development of QA systems in higher education requires finding the right balance between improvement of quality and accountability (Westerheijden et al., 2014). The other fundamental premise was that the 'imposition' of formal QA system by nation states or governments on higher education appeared to be one of the most demanding and intrusive policy interventions that HEIs have to

deal with. In many countries, university staff and generally HEIs response to changes brought by QA reforms were complex. The national quality agencies, their roles or functions and QA mechanisms were readily questioned and in the extreme cases resisted or rejected (El-Khawas, 2013; Salto, 2018). Given that many studies seek to justify rather than problematic QA systems, resistance was often described as a practical difficulty requiring a remedy instead of a social phenomenon requiring critical inquiry and explanation (Okoche, 2017).

Within the broad and key areas of analytical focus adumbrated above, much scholarly work had focused on the 'technical' rather than the 'political' dimension of QA (Kauko, et al., 2018; Skolnik, 2010). This study examined the political dimension of the development of the QA system for higher education in Malawi by focusing on the following 'grand' research question:

- *'How has the national QA system for higher education in Malawi been developed amidst a rapidly globalizing QA policy environment and how does it operate to assure the quality of higher education nationally and at institutional level'?*

The policy trajectory study approach (Ball 1994, 2006) was adopted by exploring the research questions beginning with the gestation of the QA system reform, production of policy instruments to concern with implementation and outcome or effects. Chapter four presented the policy trajectory framework originally developed by Stephen Ball and colleagues (Bowe et al., 1992) and Ball (1994). The framework was modified to take into account the multi-scalar (local, national, regional and global) dimension of higher education QA system reforms; state-centred constraints; and the dynamic two-way interaction of structure and agency. The refined policy trajectory framework framed the operationalisation of the 'grand' research questions for the study into five specific research questions and provided the analytical and conceptual tool for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data by examining four loosely connected context of the development trajectory for the QA system for higher education in Malawi:

Context of influence	1. *What external (global) and internal (national) factors influenced the need for the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi to be identified, justified and placed onto the government policy agenda?*
Context of policy text production	2. *What are 'the key characteristics of the policy texts' relating to the national QA system for higher education for Malawi and how were they produced?*
Context of practice or implementation	3. *How does the national QA system coordinated by NCHE operate to assure quality of higher education in Malawi?*
Context of policy outcome or effects	4. *What has been the influence of the national QA system and procedures on practices within the universities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation?* 5. *How do higher education institutions in Malawi respond to the QA mechanism and what structural factors constitute the implementation gap?*

11.2. Conclusion of the study

The following conclusions and claims are made based on the research questions, analytical focus and findings of the study:

11.2.1. The evolution of the QA system agenda for higher education in Malawi

Global, regional and national constellation of actors, structural dynamics and policy discourses interacted in complex ways to influence the QA system agenda for higher education in Malawi. Global influence manifested through the impact of internationalization of higher education and policy learning by national decision-making policy actors from experiences in other countries and international QA initiatives. International organizations (IOs) particularly, the World Bank and UNESCO had been instrumental in providing technical and financial support for educational sector studies, sponsoring policy learning and capacity building trainings for national decision-making policy actors, hiring consultants to develop specific QA frameworks, and providing infrastructure for the national QA agency. As the main drivers of QA reforms for higher education at the global scale (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019) it was apparent that the World Bank and UNESCO have various 'soft' tools to move a country into their preferred policy direction, which eschewed the traditional 'hard' imposition of policies via aid conditionality. It can be argued that the World Bank and UNESCO influenced both the QA system agenda and actual development and implementation of the QA system, confirming Maniku (2008) that the development of national QA systems for higher education in developing countries has been actively promoted and financially supported by the World Bank and UNESCO.

The QA system reform was heavily influenced by regional dictates. This was similar to regional integration processes in Europe, where the European Bologna Process, with its heavy emphasis on QA triggered national QA reforms as part of development cooperation (Michaela Martin, 2018). The African Union (AU) at continental level and Southern African Development Community (SADC) within the Sothern African sub-region where Malawi is found, were the key drivers of regionalization initiatives that embodied harmonization of higher education systems and standardization of QA structures aimed to ensure comparability of qualifications and facilitate academic and labour mobility across countries. While the AU and SADC did not have the direct role, the evidence underscored the power of the two entities in influencing the agendas for national policy debates and content of the QA system reform through the formation of continental and regional QA structures and frameworks with which all Members countries including Malawi must comply.

The national context was however, the main arena for the formulation of the rationale for the QA system reform. Despite the international and regional pressure, the QA system agenda was not straightforward. Malawi having undergone neoliberal restructuring of the economy and public sector termed structural adjustment programmes since 1981, the debate about quality in higher education reflected various national contextual factors associated with these neoliberal transformations. But the change in approach to QA in higher education owed much to the national policy legacy and policy learning processes. As Capano (1996) argued:

> "The course and features (nature, intensity and modality) of change in higher education policies are the result of power relations, of interest articulation and of policy beliefs by the actors involved. These, on both an individual and a collective level interact in a public policy arena which is strongly influenced by past decisions and by the institutionalized organizational and cultural features of the sector (policy legacy) as well as the learning process that may develop within the policy sector, thus contributing to the change of belief system shared by decision-making policy actors" (p.270).

The national historical policy legacy and traditional state-university relations characterized by state supervisory and the dominant self-regulation governance model of the only public university at the time mediated policy reform. As such, the QA reform in its institutional form had been incremental, beginning with the creation of the Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) – the government structure that regulated only newly established HEIs from 1993 to 2009. The issue of quality was problematized by national policy makers in various ways linked to broader policy debates resulting in framing the problem broadly as a 'regulatory and quality

control problem' in which the CEC was delegitimized following recommendations of the National Education Conference organized by the Malawi government in 2005. The adopted solution was to build the state regulatory regime through 'agencification' of the national QA system for higher education. This underscored the central role of ideas (policy learning) and discursive processes in policy development (Béland, 2009). It also demonstrated the impact of globalisation in reconstituting the nation state education polity, in which the national state was increasingly influenced not only by international (supranational) and regional actors, but also by global discourses that framed the social imaginaries of policymakers but in ways that were mediated by national traditions and local politics (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

11.2.2. Development of policy instruments for the national QA system

The development of national QA system for higher education in Malawi was fundamentally a process of 'translation': a matter of learning and adapting ideas originating from elsewhere; and 'bricolage': drawing upon principles, procedures and practices that already existed in the Malawian higher education system. This involved adapting international, African continental and SADC regional QA models and frameworks, which were translated, modified and otherwise altered in varying degrees and combined with existing national/local QA standards, procedures and practices. It appeared rather than viewing national policymakers as simply recipients of global reforms the evidence acknowledged their active agency as reflected in selective policy learning and local adaptation.

Policy text production had been a complex process. This reflected the dynamic tension and dilemma associated with translating international QA practices to the national context and the fundamental differences among national policy actors on the philosophy of the QA system and what should be the appropriate QA standards design. Policy processes were characterised by 'depoliticization' in which text production appeared "to be the application of a set of technical rules rather than political decisions about allocating values" (Jayasuriya, 2015, p. 973). There were instances where the technical-rationalistic view of 'what works' in other SADC countries superseded critical interrogation and debate and that power rather than the technical soundness of the QA system and standards led to policy settlement. The result was that several inconsistences and anomalies were not resolved during policy development, which contributed to contestations about the regulatory role of NCHE and implementation of the QA system.

Policy development mainly used the consultative approach and expert consultancy approach. But in general, the inclusiveness of policy processes varied with policy instruments and in some cases, it was marginal. Policy processes were controlled by government agencies (MoEST and NCHE) and mainly involved senior university managers, local experts, international consultants and other actors external to university. Academic unit managers (deans and heads of departments) and academic staff were not fully involved and felt the development of the QA system was characterised by a top-down approach, hence lacked ownership. This supported Luckett (2007b) that national QA systems mooted and driven by government policy elites, QA agencies and university management are generally regarded as managerial and bureaucratic and lack ownership by academic staff, "which tend to have serious implications in terms of policy implementation" (Mhlanga, 2008, p. 301).

11.2.3. Implementation of the national QA system

The NCHE was the central body responsible for regulating the national QA system for higher education in Malawi. Although there were various other professional regulatory bodies that played a role by accrediting professional programmes, professional regulation was but preliminary to NCHE QA processes. The independence of the QA agency irrespective of affiliation, is necessary to function effectively and protect its legitimacy (Materu 2007). NCHE was at policy level semi-autonomous, but the extent to which it was in practice operationally autonomous was contested. Finding the right balance between NCHE operational autonomy and accountability to government remained problematic partly because NCHE was more like a department of the Ministry of Education; and the Minister both appointed the NCHE Board (the Council) and had a final say on all operational decisions of the council.

When NCHE 'hit the ground' policy actors within universities did not mutely accept the policy settlement of the NCHE Act No 15 of 2011. Rather some functions of NCHE were contested and declared not feasible, thereby triggering the process of drafting the new higher education bill to address the inconstancies. This rendered credence to Ball (2017) and the theoretical framing of the trajectory framework "that policies are contested, interpreted and 're-written' (enacted) in the arena of practice and the rhetoric, texts and meaning of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practice" (p. 10).

The national QA system adopted the integrated QA model which combined internal and external QA mechanisms to achieve four dominant purposes of the QA system: accountability,

regulation and control, compliance and maintenance of standards, and improvement of quality. This required NCHE to both define and control the improvement and accountability agenda. However, there was very little critical reflection and deliberation about these competing dimensions of QA and working definition (s) of quality. The QA system was rolled out without formal explicit definition (s) of quality such that the shared understanding of 'quality' among stakeholders was missing.

Accreditation, which covered both institution and programmes was the main QA procedure. Improvement of quality was considered as other regulated activities linked to the accountability system. HEIs were required to self-assess against the minimum quality standards to primarily 'enlighten' NCHE, but also to help institutions develop the improvement plan. The important element of improvement built into the system was the institutional audits and monitoring follow-up visits undertaken after accreditation processes to ensure suggested improvements are put in place. NCHE was also mandated to facilitate establishment of formal internal QA (IQA) systems for HEIs to take responsibility of QA and engage in self-regulation that enhances quality. However, in practice, NCHE was unable to regularly carryout monitoring follow-up visits and had never conducted a comprehensive institutional audit. Notwithstanding NCHE directive, formal IQA systems were also yet to be fully institutionalised in the studied universities. Thus, despite quality improvement being embedded in the design of the national QA system, the implementation of the system during the 'first phase' examined by the study appeared to be about regulatory control, compliance and accountability. This implied NCHE was yet to find the right balance between internal QA mechanisms often driven towards improving HEIs and external QA mechanisms associated with regulatory control and making HEIs accountable, a challenge widely discussed in literature (Westerheijden et al., 2014).

11.2.4. Influence of the national QA system on university practices

NCHE brought varying degrees of changes and improvements in selected core areas of university activities after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation. However, the changes could not be wholly attributed to the effect of external quality evaluation. There was evidence that some of the changes were not the result of the NCHE QA procedures but were driven internally by HEIs institutions themselves.

The institutions were to some extent more obsessed with demonstrating compliance to external requirements simply to attain accreditation and minimise disruptions to their operations. The

actual implementation of some changes brought by the national QA system was short-lived and undermined by lack of support by deans, heads of departments and academic staff and deployment of insufficient resources by university management. NCHE procedures mostly influenced changes in the private university, where internal QA procedures did not generally exist for some core university activities compared to the two public universities whose major limitation was lack of compliance to their existing institutional procedures. Thus, it was possible to find variations among HEIs, such that when examining the influence of the national QA system on practices within universities, these variations need to be considered.

The changes triggered by the national QA system were mostly structural in nature. These included: strengthening university governance and management structure; enhancement of infrastructure and physical facilities leading to improve teaching and learning conditions; establishment of formal institutional QA structures and monitoring systems for educational processes and research; reducing recruitment of underqualified staff; reinforcing upgrading of staff qualifications to master's and PhD level; and adoption of learning-oriented outcome-based education; high quality curriculum design; and rigorous curriculum development processes. However, the actual influence on improving the quality of teaching and student learning practices was limited. The failure of the national QA system to influenced quality of teaching and learning partly reflected the lack of ownership of national QA processes by deans, heads of department and ordinary academic staff due to their marginalization in policy processes. This suggested improving quality in higher education cannot be merely equated with the formal institutional QA system tools and procedures, although this forms part of it, but that the process builds on the norms, values and intrinsic factors related to academics' teaching practices, commitment for teaching, subject knowledge and professional accountability (Harvey, 2018). The official interventions can be successful only if they are 'owned' by those whose practice they are intended to improve (Tao, 2013).

11.2.5. Response of universities to the QA regime and the implementation gap

Participants at the three-case study HEIs generally perceived that the key principle of having the formal QA system and NCHE as the external QA agency responsible for regulating quality and higher education was necessary. However, they had difficulties with how the design of the QA system was conceptualised; the standards that were developed and how the system was being implemented. The dominant issues raised included: lack of awareness and understanding among university actors of the QA system design, role and mandate of NCHE; the prescriptive

monolithic approach adopted by NCHE that lacked flexibility and respect for diversity; the composition, competence and professionalism of reviewers; and more managerial and bureaucratic national QA system that primarily focused on enforcing compliance and penalising institutions rather than being facilitative and improvement oriented. Further, the structural conditions required to successfully implement the national QA system were not present at both national and university level including adequate funding, human resource capacity; and the comprehensive higher education law that could ensure a unified and coordinated system.

Overall, participants responded to the QA regime in divergent ways largely shaped by structural factors and agential social action unique to their institutions. The responses resonated with three coping strategies posited by Teelken (2012). The most positive responses were at CS2-PubU public university, mainly characterised by 'formal instrumentality'. Respondents demonstrated acceptance and reliance on formal external QA mechanisms without a critical perspective and believed that having the external QA agency was necessary, to improve quality, comparability of standards, international recognition and graduates' employability. At CS3-PubU public university, respondents were very critical and developed 'symbolic compliance' to NCHE QA mechanisms, by pretending to be enthusiastic yet adapting to the QA system procedures only at superficial level. At CS1-PvtU private university respondents were more realistic, down to earth and dealt with NCHE QA mechanism in a critical but serious manner reflective of 'professional pragmatism'. The fear of being discredited or deregistered and establishing the institutions social status by being accredited, with the economic motive of maximising returns from increased student enrolment, was more important than their normative motives of complying with NCHE QA mechanisms because of the sense that it enhanced quality.

The implication was that contrary to NCHE's ambition of establishing formal QA processes as the core value of HEIs, it appeared some institutions merely complied with the accreditation processes in order to fulfil the law but did not embrace national QA processes as a mechanism for enhancing quality. This showed that actors within universities do not mutely accept QA reforms. The achievement of outcomes of the national QA system is significantly a localised context-specific process, that requires seriously attending to actors at the micro-level within universities as both 'makers' and 'shapers' of QA reforms. As Pham (2018) argued, the benefits of external reviews depend on how the evaluated institution is committed to improvement. As

long as the university perceives that it was forced to do accreditation, it could continue to engage in superficial compliance with external accreditors. A related concern is the tendency of "window-dressing", when the university believes that gaining an accreditation certificate would give them some advantage of external image. In this case the impact of external evaluation on improvement of quality tend to be limited (Pham, 2018).

11.3. Contributions of the study

This study provides context-specific empirical knowledge about the national QA system for higher education in Malawi thereby contributing the perspective of a developing country to the larger body of QA literature which is predominantly Western. Formal QA system for higher education is a recent phenomenon in Malawi. Few studies (Mambo et al., 2016; Msiska, 2016; Shawa, 2007, 2014, 2017) done in Malawi explored QA practices within universities, but did not focus on the national QA system regulated by NCHE. Only one study (Kajawo & Dong, 2020) explored accreditation issues in selected private universities. This study closes this knowledge gap and stands to make a practical contribution. By analysing the QA system from conception and development, to concerns about implementation and outcomes, informed by various theoretical concepts that sought to offer critique of the system, I believe the evidence provide a comprehensive understanding of critical issues related to the QA system that would help national policy makers to further the development and strengthen the national QA system for higher education in Malawi.

By taking a policy trajectory approach, the study differs markedly from previous empirical studies on QA and makes a range of theoretical contributions to knowledge. First it demonstrates the central role of ideas (policy learning) and discursive processes and how institutional constraints impact ideational processes and policy change, thereby contributing to policy scholarship on dynamics of policy change. Second, it shows that while globalisation impact the nation state by reconstituting the national education polity, the national state and institutions remain central to politics of policy change. Despite the undeniable role of global discourses, transnational/supranational actors and processes, national traditions and local politics variously mediate policy reform. Third, it demonstrates that the concept of 'translation' offers the plausible explanation of policy making in higher education within the globalising context of QA reforms. National QA system development is predominantly a re-creation of QA ideas and practices emitted from the global and regional setting and borrowed from elsewhere and then recombined with local practices or recontextualised in varying degrees in

specific national settings. Forth, it shows that QA systems mooted and driven by government policy elites, national QA agencies and university management whilst marginalising academic staff tend to be more managerial and bureaucratic thereby supressing the traditional academic ethos, norms and values about quality teaching and learning, hence are less likely to improve quality of higher education. Fifth, the compliance of HEIs to external QA mechanisms does not necessarily imply all institutions embrace such mechanisms in the sense that it enhances quality. Rather, HEIs with historical legacy and disciplinary cultures of external regulatory compliance are more likely to accept state regulation as legitimate and necessary to help institutions to improve quality, while historically autonomous HEIs, with strong liberal and collegial cultures are more likely to exude critical resistance and comply with state (external) QA regime largely to fulfil the legal requirements especially when the institution and programmes' stability is threatened. HEIs predisposed to profit making (i.e., private universities) comply with the state QA regime for fear of being de-registered or discredited and to establish social status with the economic motive of maximising returns from increased students' enrolment but not primarily because of the normative motive that it enhances quality.

The other contribution is methodological. While the study was undertaken within the borders of Malawi, my approach was situated within the growing education policy research corpus that problematises the traditional understanding of nation-state bound territorialism and the dichotomy of abstract global and concrete local (Ball, Junemann, & Santori, 2017; Kauko et al., 2018). By globalising the policy trajectory framework and embedding network theory within the conventional case study methodology, the study transcended both the conceptual global-local dichotomy and 'methodological nationalism'(Ball, 2017) to account for global, regional, national and local dynamics and provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of QA system reform in Malawi within the globalizing environment of education policy reforms. This would provide important insights to other education policy researchers.

Most importantly, the study provides unique insight of the political dimension of QA in higher education. It advances the view that the problems of QA and management in higher education cannot be solved by identifying the 'right' methodology, technique or adjusting the strategy as premised on technical-rational perspectives, even though this is important to achieve strategic ends. Rather, this also requires attending to the link between the QA reform and the political context in which specific QA methodologies are constructed. The evidence of the study has supported this argument by showing that the nature of policy development processes including

who is involved and the power dynamics at play has significant implications on the ensuing QA system design and methodologies, which eventually affect implementation and consequently the overall impact of the QA system. The study concludes by supporting Skolnik (2010) that "rather than denying the political nature of QA, it is better to accept that QA in higher education is a socially constructed domain of power and design QA methodologies in a way that is appropriate for a political process" (p. 1).

11.4. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further Research

The study distinguished policy outcomes/effects between first order and second order effects. The first order effects are the changes in practice or structures evident within the institutions and across the system, while the second order effects are the impact or outcome of these changes. This study was limited to first order effects of the national QA system after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation. It was too early to assess the impact based on one cycle of accreditation. Now that NCHE has embarked on the second cycle of assessment for accreditation, future research can investigate the impact that NCHE QA mechanism are having within universities.

The study was based on perspectives of policy actors within government and university senior managers, middle academic managers and ordinary academic staff. Due to practical consideration such as limited time, accessibility and the Covid 19 pandemic it did not extend to students, professional regulatory bodies, employers and parents. However, diverse expectations and experiences of various stakeholders groups are expected to contribute to the development of a more effective and comprehensive QA system (Beerkens & Udam, 2017). For example, students are regarded as the immediate beneficiaries or stakeholders in higher education. Their point of view is deemed crucial in gaining information regarding the quality of education provision and the extent to which the QA mechanism are working effectively. Therefore, future research could explore other stakeholder perspectives.

11.5. Implications and recommendations for improved policy and practice

Based on findings and implications of the study, the following suggestions are made to improve policy and practice.

i. The success of the national QA system depends not simply upon designing technically robust QA systems and the rigour of implementation but require the QA system that all stakeholders can agree upon. NCHE should fully embrace the participatory policy

development approach. The input and influence of all stakeholders should be sought and facilitated in the design, implementation, interpretation and resulting action of QA evaluation to improve the QA system and ensure inclusiveness, ownership and transparency of QA processes. This could provide an appropriate way to deal with the politics of QA by accepting the diversity of views and interests of all stakeholders and working towards reconciliation.

ii. Universities actors do not mutely accept policy change and that the traditional legitimacy of the QA system linked to the legal mandate of NCHE was insufficient to guarantee support. NCHE should devise a comprehensive communication strategy that involves regular two-way communication and critical dialogue with university stakeholders notably students, academics and administrative staff to build shared understanding and responsibility.

iii. The more bureaucratic the approach to QA that primarily focus on accountability, regulatory control and penalising institution for non-compliance, the greater the risk of 'game playing' where institutions primarily focus on learning the 'rules of the game' to attain accreditation, without necessarily striving to continually improve their practices to enhance quality.

NCHE should build trust with institutions by embracing a more facilitative role that builds capacity of universities to focus on quality enhancement. NCHE might need to consider alternative QA evaluation paradigms such as "Fourth Generation Evaluation" (Guba, & Lincoln, 1989) and "Standards Based and Responsive Evaluation" (Stake, 2004) which provide a framework for involving stakeholders in QA in a meaningful, collaborative way and emphasises responsiveness to key issues identified by stakeholders during the QA evaluation process over measurable results.

NCHE should balance enforcement of compliance to uniform standards for the sake of standardisation across the system and the need for diversity. Also given the high cost of institutional assessment and audits, NCHE should consider going for more 'risk-based approaches' to QA. Better established institutions with successful track record of quality, financial standing and performance after perhaps three successive accreditation by NCHE, could receive 'light tough' regulation, thereby reducing the

need to engage in external institutional assessment and audits, but only assessment of programmes for accreditation and 'meta' monitoring of internal QA processes. Only new entrants and HEIs considered 'high quality risk' could undergo extensive institutional and programmes assessment and audits subject to consequences including de-registration and closure.

The study revealed that many of the conditions required for successful implementation of the national QA system in Malawi were not present at national and university level.

iv. Malawi government through the Ministry of Education should enact a comprehensive higher education law to ensure a coordinated higher education system that could enhance quality delivery of university education and strengthen the regulation of QA by overcoming regulatory tension arising from numerous regulatory laws or legislation governing individual HEIs, statutory professional bodies and other governance agencies within the higher education system.

v. Malawi government should revise the NCHE legal framework to include a requirement that universities and programmes should only start operating and enrolling students after being dully and fully registered and accredited by NCHE. This would avoid the situation in which dully registered universities enrol students before attaining accreditation thereby affecting students enrolled in those universities in terms of wasting their money and time or graduating from unaccredited programmes which has an impact on their employability when the university is closed after operating for a while for failing to meet the standards requirements for accreditation.

vi. Malawi government through the Ministry of Education and Department of Statutory Corporation should ensure that NCHE is adequately resourced with funding and professional/technical staff with adequate training in QA to effectively carryout all the functions and duties of the Council.

vii. NCHE should ensure that reviewers are experts in the subject area or discipline, have no conflict of interest, receive adequate training and that their reports are comprehensive with precisely stated evidence-based recommendations. Reviewer training should be comprehensive covering NCHE QA processes and fundamental

issues about QA at the conceptual level. NCHE could design an online QA training course that could be offered annually to current and prospective reviewers.

viii. University leadership at all levels should facilitate the institutionalisation of formal QA processes being established through the QA units or directorates within HEIs. The QA units or Directorates should have an allocation of funding for its activities, adequate infrastructure and full staff complement comprising professionally trained personnel in QA to improve the coordination of QA activities. The directorate of QA should create 'an enabling environment for information dissemination on QA through perhaps workshops and seminars for all staff and students. This would enhance the process of building a quality culture in universities'. University senior management is effective if it ensures active participation of all actors (i.e., deans, heads of departments, frontline academic and administrative staff and students) in QA with clear responsibilities at all levels and monitoring their implementation (Seniwoliba & Yakubu, 2015).

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APPENDIX

Appendix I: Pilot Study Report

Pilot Study

My doctorate education policy research study aimed to explore and understand how the national QA system for the higher education system in Malawi had been developed within the globalising environment of QA reforms, how it was being implemented and the influence it was having on practices within HEIs. This was sought to be addressed by five research questions:

- What external (global) and internal (national) contextual factors influenced the need for the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi to be identified, justified and placed onto the government policy agenda?
- What are the characteristics of the policy texts relating to the national QA system for higher education and how were they produced?
- How does the national QA system coordinated by NCHE operate to assurance the quality of higher education in Malawi?
- What has been the influence of the national QA system and procedures on practices within the university after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation?
- How do HEIs in Malawi respond to the QA mechanism and what structural factors constitute the implementation gap?

A pilot study was conducted to draw insights on the efficacy of the proposed methods to address the objectives of the study. The findings were used to improve the research instruments. This report presents the preliminary findings of the pilot study. I briefly outline the research methods, before presenting the critical discourse analysis of a policy document, followed by the analysis of interview data.

Research Methods

Interviews with policy actors and policy documents provided the sources of data, which was analysed through thematic analysis and critical discourse analyses, respectively. I conducted a semi-structured interview with a senior academic member of staff from a university college in Malawi, using interview schedules planned for case study universities. I also conducted a simplified form of critical discourse analysis (CDA) of one policy document constituting ‘QA policy instruments ensemble’ for Malawi. I drew on Fairclough (2003) CDA techniques which combine linguistic and social analysis, by examining the semiotic and linguistic features of policy texts; interpreted through the interdiscursive processes of text production; and explained by social practices, constituting the policy context and social order. Table below provides a summary of data sources.

Table: Summary of data Sources

Interview		Document analysis	
Participant	Academic Staff	**Title**	"Standards and guideline for QA in Malawi's HEIs"
Qualification & Rank	PhD, Senior lecturer & former Head of Department	**Author**	NCHE
Gender	Female	**Publication year**	2013
Years worked in current university	11 years	**Access**	Public Domain & Accessible online
Employment Type	Full-time (Tenure)		
Date & Time	4th February 2020. 16:22 -17:27 pm (1 hour, 5 min).		
Type of University	Public University		

Section A: Critical Discourse Analysis of Policy Document

The "*Standards and guideline for QA in Malawi's HEIs"* (NCHE 2013) policy document was analysed as part of pilot study. This section provides the general overview of the policy text, followed by the analysis of the selected extract from policy document presented with the section title used in the document. Two themes were identified and discussed. I specifically attempted to partially answer the first two objectives.

Overview of the Policy Document

The "*Standards and Guidelines for QA in Malawi's HEIs"* (NCHE, 2013) policy text set out standards and guidelines on how to conduct different aspects of QA in higher education, covering internal and external QA and how external QA agencies should be evaluated. It was addressed to the wider public while primarily targeting HEIs and regulators. The general structure covered three chapters but the third chapter was further structured into twenty-three standards covered in three parts. The document was characterised by a hybrid genre in which elements of policy genre (explaining the new QA system) were interwoven with the promotional genre (various ways of marketing the ideas). Fairclough (2003) stated that governments tend to use the promotional genres in order to facilitate change envisaged in public policy. "Through promotional genres the "public perceptions are 'managed', and new discourses are articulated and become institutionalized" (Taylor, 2004 p. 439).The grammatical mood of the text was both 'declarative' and 'imperative'. The document provided information about how quality should be assured as 'factual' statements and demanded actions based on the 'knowledge' it presented as an obligation. There was wide use of modal verbs 'should' and 'must' signifying obligation (Curto, 2018).

Extract 1: "Introduction: Context, Principles and Aims"

The first chapter of this document was titled as above and located in pages 3 and 4. The overall tone was authoritative as assertions were presented as indisputable facts. The **"*need for the national QA systems for higher education in Malawi*"** could be identified as the major theme. The extract was structured in form of 'problem - solution' (Fairclough, 2003a). The problem of 'quality' was linked to '*massification'* and challenges of *'funding'* rising costs of higher

education (p.3) and adopting the national and formal QA system was presented as a 'solution' (Chikazinga, 2019). The document evoked the rhetoric of globalization. It stated that:

> "Quality assurance in higher education has become a key component in the delivery of education in almost all countries in the world since this affects standards. If Malawi is to achieve its aspiration to be a *dynamic knowledge-based economy,* as reflected in the Malawi growth and development strategy, then the higher education sector will need to demonstrate that it takes seriously the quality of its programmes and wards and is willing to put in place the means of demonstrating that quality" (p.3).

The policy text used the globalising discourse of 'knowledge-based economy' to legitimate the QA system reform. The potency of the 'knowledge based economy' discourse as the policy condensation for QA reforms taking place globally is widely documented (Bernhard, 2011; Teferra, 2013; Varghese & Martin, 2013). The knowledge based economy emphasises the value of knowledge in development and global competitiveness, and places greater importance on production and application of knowledge; innovation and technology; investment in human capital and hence on quality higher education (World Bank, 2002). The narrative took the form of 'mythopoesis' characterized by both the 'moral tale' and 'cautionary tale'(Fairclough, 2003). It was implied that Malawi would achieve its aspiration to become a knowledge-based economy, if HEIs adhered to the national QA standards and procedures, and by implication, it suggested the reverse would happen if they did not. This demonstrated the promotional character of the policy text depicting what Edwards & Nicoll (2001) described as a 'persuasive text'. The lexico-grammatical construction further attempted to carefully privilege particular ways of thinking about the QA system. A sample of statements would suffice:

> "*All over the world there is* increasing interest in higher education quality and standards reflecting both the rapid growth of higher education and its cost to the public and private money. *There is* a quest for *harmonization* of quality higher education in the SADC region. Most institutions of higher learning are now aiming at *internationalisation* of their programmes, which can be done if the standards are acceptable to all stakeholders. Malawi is *no exception* to the quest for QA and this need is demonstrated by the public debate on the quality of education" (NCHE, 2013, p. 3 emphasis added).

The use of 'the present simple tense '*there is';* and present perfect tense '*has become'* shows that the text was presented in declarative sentences that constructed formal QA systems as a reality" that was 'out there'. The interplay between agency and phrases '*all over the world'* and *'Malawi is no exception'* advanced an implied authority to the national QA system that all 'right-minded' stakeholders in higher education had no choice but to embrace and implement the prescribed standards and guidelines' (Chikazinga, 2019c, p. 8). The changes at 'global' and 'regional' level, particularly the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) regional '*harmonization*' and '*internationalization*' were presented as the global socio-political context to which the national QA system also responded. According to Knight (2004, p. 11) "internationalization is the process of integrating an international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, function (teaching, research and service) and delivery of higher education". Kallo & Semchenko (2016) and Adamu (2012) demonstrated how internationalization has shaped the harmonization of national and regional QA systems. The

"SADC protocol on education and training" for which Malawi is a signatory, was the key instrument meant to achieve the harmonisation and integration of regional higher education systems that would eventually facilitate the standardisation of QA structures and compatibility of qualifications in the SADC region to promote academic and labour mobility (SADC, 1997). This suggested that even though "no concrete, legally binding obligation could be derived from the SADC Protocol" (Hahn, 2005, p. 16), regional QA initiatives provided an impetus for the development of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi.

"Policy text production was another theme in the extract". The document provided an overview of the production of the policy text to persuade readers to 'buy' the 'knowledge' and 'truth' embedded in the standard and guidelines. In one of its bold declarations, the document stated that:

> "Standards and Guidelines for QA in Malawi's HEIs have been prepared by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). In developing these guidelines, a *number of documents* from other institutions *across the world* were taken into account, *with the most influential* being the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESGs)*" (NCHE, 2013 p. 3. emphasis added).

The policy texts explicitly applied the 'evidentiary warrant' - cognitive validity based on evidence (Hyatt, 2013) to legitimize claims that policy development was evidence based. The phrases *'a number of documents'* and *'across the world'* attempted to show that the evidence was not only 'comprehensive' but also 'extensive', which in effect worked to exclude alternative ways of thinking. Hyatt (2013) argued that evidence should not be understood as a "neutral - entity" as it represents the researcher's "production, selection, omissions and interpretations, and these decisions are imbued with values and embedded in ideology" (p. 7). The collocation '*with the most influential*' attempted to demonstrate the 'credibility' and 'trustworthiness' of evidence to justify the proposed standards and guidelines as perhaps 'incontestable'. Thus, the use of evidentiary warrant suggested that policy makers attempted to establish that the QA standards and frameworks developed for Malawi were valid and reliable.

The intertextual analysis confirmed that the document drew heavily from the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)'(ESG, 2015). Adopted as part of the Bologna process in Bergen in May, 2005, the ESGs "aimed to provide a source of assistance and guidance to both HEIs in developing their own QA systems and agencies undertaking external QA as well as to contribute to a common framework for the European Higher Education Area" (ENQA, 2009, 2015). Woldegiorgis (2018) observed that the Bologna process has had a major impact in Africa in terms of re-shaping higher education systems and policies at national, sub-regional and continental levels. The author claimed that regional authorities, national government and HEIs are compelled to consider the Bologna process as a potential experience to learn and adapt from when developing policies due to the longstanding historical colonial links and the commonalities of challenges faced in higher education (Woldegiorgis, 2018). Integrating international standards into the national set of standards for QA fostered mutual understanding and recognition of QA processes, which was important in promoting international recognition of qualification (Kohoutek, 2014; Stensaker, et al., 2010). The major challenge however related to the extent to which international standards are adapted to take into account the national and institutional contextual peculiarities (Harvey & Williams, 2010b; Woldegiorgis, 2018). A close reading showed that the generic structure of the 'Standards and Guideline for Malawi' and much of the content were similar to the ESG

text. However, some content in the Malawian policy document has been paraphrased and re-interpreted while the other content had been entirely excluded. This was perhaps intended to accommodate the Malawian context.

Section B: Analysis of Interview Data

The preliminary analysis of interview data focused on the implementation and influence of the policy within universities. The pilot study used the interview schedule for university case studies. Three major themes were discussed: participation in policy processes; influence of national QA system within universities; and academic behaviours and responses to the national QA system regime.

Participation in Policy Processes

Policy outcomes depend not simply upon designing technically 'good' policies by identifying ideal policy solutions upfront and top down but require policy alternatives that collaborating agencies and stakeholders can agree upon. Stakeholder participation in QA policy development has been subject to discussion in many studies(Cardoso et al., 2018; Saarinen, 2010). Participatory policy development does not only reflect a democratic culture, more importantly it helps to build a sense of ownership of policy by all involved (Mhlanga, 2008). This helps to enhance legitimacy and policy buy-in from implementers which is necessary to achieve policy outcomes (Cardoso et al., 2018). The findings revealed that the participant (senior academic) was not involved during the formulation of the national QA policies, standards and procedures. While different actors can participate in the policy process at different levels (Beerkens & Udam, 2017), it was evident that the participant, as head of department at the time, did not have knowledge of any consultative meeting involving academics related to national QA policies. Rather the Dean of Faculty and College Principal were the ones who were engaged. This was despite that policy processes within the university, were driven by democratic and consultative values which provided for the university community to participate in policies processes. The participant however expressed the view that academic staff as implementers of the curriculum and students as beneficiaries could have been engaged in the national QA policy formulation processes. As the participant explains:

> I can say honestly that I was not involved. Since I was Head of Department that time, I never came across the NCHE people to ask how as a college we work on issue of quality. But NCHE could have conducted some consultative meetings with the one who implement the curriculum. They could have solicited the much-needed information from us on the ground, the one who implement the curriculum as well as students (AP1, 4/02/20).

Influence of the National QA policy within the University

NCHE (2013, 2015) standards discussed in the previous section, indicate that QA policy in higher education in Malawi concentrate efforts on several core areas of university activity. This section provides findings on the influence of QA policies in three core areas: governance policies and institutional management; academic programme development; teaching, learning and student's assessment.

Governance Policies and Management of Institutions

The case institution response and commitment to the QA policy was reflected in its institutional re-organization in terms of the new management and organization structure. The new position of the Director of Quality assurance was created and pitched at the level of Dean of Faculty, to be responsible for QA processes within the institution. The directorate of QA ensured that the

institution has coherent QA policies, strategic plans, mission statements and other quality assurance procedural manuals. It also ensured that the QA policies were translated into practice. The quality audit and institutional accreditation processes by NCHE further provided an impetus for rapid changes in core areas of the institution that required improvements, including physical infrastructure. As Mambo, et al., (2016) point out, most of the existing infrastructures at public institutions in Malawi were designed to carter for small classes and It had proved difficult to adapt the use of this infrastructure to the context of higher enrolments. The poor funding allocation in support of infrastructure maintenance further resulted in a steady decline in the quality of physical facilities. This implied that to attain the accreditation status the institution had to ensure that dilapidated infrastructures were maintained. For instance, the participant reported that, as part of preparation for quality audit by NCHE the institution had to convert the cafeteria into a nursing skills laboratory, since the skills lab that they previously had was smaller and could not accommodate the larger number of students in the college (AP1, 4/02/20).

Academic Programme Development

In terms of programme development, it was apparent that the institution has had rigorous standards and procedures for quality assuring academic programmes, prior to the establishment of NCHE. There was an emphasis on regular reviews of programmes at the end of each programme cycle, normally five years. Tracer studies of former graduates and consultative meetings with external stakeholders, particularly the professional body; Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi, Ministry of Health officials, and nurse practitioner from hospitals are used to generate feedback to inform both reviews and development of new programmes. A rigorous process of programme approval was followed where a newly developed programme went through various college and university committee structures before the university senate could finally approve the programme. Apart from the internal dimension which involved committees assessing the programmes before they are introduced, there was also an external dimension, in which the professional body and NCHE would come in to accredit the same programme. However, the influence of external QA on curriculum development was perceived to be significant through accreditation of the professional body, the Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi, rather than through NCHE as a national external QA agency. The professional body prescribed a 'core syllabus' and standards of nursing practice, which every institution offering nursing programmes, were required to incorporate in their curriculum, for their graduates to be eligible to sit for licensure examinations and qualify for practice. As the licensure exams were administered by the same professional body, this operated like a compulsion for institutions to adhere to standards set by the professional body. The Nurses and Midwives Council of Malawi develops the national 'core syllabus' and scope of nursing practice, after which nursing colleges, follow to develop nursing curricula and incorporate the council's core syllabus.

Teaching, learning and student assessment

The rigour of teaching, learning and student assessment practices of an institution determines the quality of delivery. As Mhlanga (2008) puts it, this forms the cutting edge of an educational institution, as it is what impacts student learning. As with the programme development process, it was noted that the institutions deployed the committee vetting systems and the use of external examiners to ensure standards of assessment practices. When lecturers have developed an exam, they were vetted at departmental and faculty level, while final year examinations were also sent to external examiners. The institution had policy booklets on assessment and student progression which precisely documented the handling of examinations and interpretations of results. The interview did not yield much detail about the monitoring of teaching and how acceptable quality teaching takes place in the academic units. Evident however was what

Kohoutek, et al, (2018) described as the political 'pick and choose', syndrome, which is the middle ground between two polar opposite of 'respect' and 'neglect' of standards. It was revealed that despite NCHE's recommendations for the institution to adopt student evaluation of lecturers teaching, there was lack of take-up in practice. As the participant pointed out:

> I think they said that to improve quality, students are supposed to evaluate us. I am not sure if that is being implemented. Maybe student evaluation of faculty members is done without our knowledge. Maybe they are done anonymously, but not to my knowledge. I am not aware (AP1, 4/02/20).

However, students' feedback constitute the most important dimension of quality monitoring and assessment since they are the only stakeholders of the education systems who can provide the immediate receivers' viewpoint(Spooren et al., 2013).

Academic Behaviours and Response to QA policies

Analysts pointed out that academics behaviours and perception of QA processes could provide important insights to the nature of both the implementation and influence of QA policies (Akalu, 2016; Saarinen, 2010). It was argued that academics as front-line staff do not mutely accept policy changes, neither were they passive recipient of management objectives (Newton, 2002). Their discretionary behaviours at the point of implementation, present a complex combination of constraints and opportunities (Rosa, Sarrico, & Amaral, 2012b). From the interview data, the participant perception of the national QA systems, manifested in four major themes of 'control', 'fault-finding', 'uncertainty about role of NCHE', and 'game playing' behaviours. The participant considered NCHE as a '*controlling body*': "we can say, NCHE is a controlling body that oversees whether universities have the capacity to offer programme in order to be accredited" (AP1, 4/02/20). This was understood to imply the regulatory role of NCHE which the participant felt did necessarily influence the micro-processes of teaching and learning. This was evident by concerns noted about the nature of the external QA processes. The participant used the term *'fault-finding'* to describe the 'policing' approach of the QA agency. That is the QA processes were more bureaucratic and focused on penalizing institutions rather than being facilitative. It was evident from the findings that a big gap existed between NCHE and the academics as practitioners. The participant demonstrated *'uncertainty about the roles and functions of NCHE'* and the extent to which it impacted on teaching and learning: "I am not very much aware of what NCHE is actually up to. Maybe if I become aware, I should be able to see if their procedures are intended to promote teaching and learning" (AP1, 4/02/20). The behaviour of the academics conformed to what Newton (2002 p. 39) described as *"game playing"* where *"impression management"* was carefully designed to fulfil requirements of the QA and monitoring process. Faculty members were on request from the institutional leadership expected to have institutional policy documents such as strategic plans, curriculum documents, organograms and timetables, on the day, of quality audit by the external agency simply to ensure that the institution was accredited.

Lessons Learnt

The pilot study proved helpful, as it drew insights to several important lessons.

- Although the analyzed policy text provided some knowledge about the QA system for higher education in Malawi, it did not give much details on other important aspects such as the policy text production processes and the actors that were involved. It could also not account for the nuances and subtleties of policy in action. As a result, the potential disjuncture's between values enshrined in the policy and the actual realization in practice could not be examined.

- The analysis of a single document could not provide comprehensive knowledge, to make strong claims about the QA system. This was because the policy text constitutes a 'genre chain', which required analyzed the entire ensemble of QA system policy documents, to have a full picture of the QA system. 'I believe analyzing all the key policy documents driving the national QA system in Malawi and triangulating document sources with interviews would provide rich data, to answer research question' (Chikazinga, 2019).
- Conducting critical discourse analysis was somehow challenging due to the general lack of explicit systematic procedure to follow. However, it proved helpful to develop key questions to guide CDA apart from Fairclough (2003) and Hyatt (2013) which were deployed in the analysis.
- Overall, critical discourse analysis of the policy text provided an important avenue 'to go beyond the level of sentences and interrogate how language in the text was used to construct the QA policy and systems; persuade stakeholders to accept and support the policy and conceal tensions and changing power relations between the QA agency and HEIs' (Chikazinga, 2019).
- In terms of interviews, it was noted that the participant had difficulties to understand some questions; other questions were redundant as they generated information already provided by other questions, while some proved to be less relevant. According to interview schedule were reviewed, to improve clarity of questions, and redundant and irrelevant questions were discarded. However, it must be pointed out that, I will still have to refine the questions in the course of interviews.

Appendix II: Interview Schedules

School of Education
35 Berkeley Square
BS8 1 JA
Bristol
www.bristol.ac.uk

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, UK
Woburn House
20-24 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HF
United Kingdom

Interview Schedule for Government officials at Ministry of Education, Directorate of Higher Education

Introduction

Thank you for accepting to participate in the study. My name is Wanangwa W.N. Chikazinga, a PhD student at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom. I am conducting a study on the development of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi as part of the requirement for the award of PhD in Education. I will mainly ask you questions concerning the role of the Ministry of Education Science and Technology in the development of the national QA system. The interview will take about one hour. As indicated on the information sheet and consent form, all the information that you will provide will be kept confidential and your identity will be anonymized. After the transcription of the interview, I will send you the transcript to verify the information that you will provide me in this interview. Would you please indicate whether you would mind being audio recorded? Feel free to ask me any question now and at any point during the interview.

Preliminary (fill answers in table)

Date of Interview		
Time		
Place		
Interviewee Code		
Interviewee Position		
Gender		
Institution		
How long (years) have you worked in	this institution (MoEST - DHE)	
	the Current Position	

Part A: Context of Influence

1. Could you please tell me the roles and main responsibilities of the Directorate of higher Education?
2. What is the current government policy and legal frameworks/instruments with respect to the development of higher education in Malawi? Probe.
    a. What is the official policy position of government on quality assurance in higher education?

3. What major developments have been undertaken by the directorate of higher education with respect to the development of the quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi?
4. Could you please explain more the background to the establishment of the National Council for higher Education (NCHE)? Probe.
    a. Is there any difference between NCHE and the previous Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) in the office of the president on quality assurance issues in higher education? Would you explain please?
5. From your experience, what national contextual factors motivated the government to establish NCHE and the national QA system for higher education in Malawi?
6. How and to what extent in your view are global imperatives impacting on the development of higher education in Malawi?
7. How and to what extent in your view have external (global and international) factors and agencies/organizations contributed to the establishment of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi? Probe.
    a. (E.g., International Consultants, recommendations of international agencies/organizations; through participation in international or regional conventions; developments in other countries?)

Part B: Context of Polity Text Production

8. What purposes is the QA system for higher education in Malawi designed to serve (i.e., accountability, compliance to standards, improvement) and how?
9. I hear, NCHE was established by an Act of Parliament, No. 15 of 2011?
    a. Were you or the Directorate of Higher Education involved in any way in the development of the NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011?
    b. If yes, could you please explain more about how this Act was developed?
    c. Who were the key players involved? What role did they play in the development process?
    d. Who funded the development of the NCHE Act? Who provided technical support? Did you visit any country? If so, which countries and why?
10. What has been the role of the Directorate of Higher Education in the development of the NCHE QA standards and accreditation frameworks (i.e., Minimum Standard for HEIs; Standards & Guidelines for QA; Standards for Accreditation of HEIs; Accreditation evaluation framework)?
11. To what extent do you think that the QA policy/regulatory instruments developed by NCHE are valid and implementable in the local context of universities in Malawi? And why?

Part C: Context of practice and Outcomes

12. How does the national QA system simultaneously promote ‘compliance’, ‘accountability’ and the ‘quality improvement’ in the context of Malawi? Are there any tradeoff that you have observed?
13. To what extent has the implementation of the national QA system regulated by NCHE brought changes to the higher education sector after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation? could you explain?
14. From your perspective, how has the national Quality Assurance system under NCHE, influenced QA practices in the higher education sector in terms of:
    a. Academic programme development
    b. Teaching and student support
    c. Student learning and Assessment

d. Physical facilities and Resources
e. Staff compliment?
f. Governance and Management
g. Research output by faculty

15. What in your view are the major challenges and constraints to the effective implementation of the national quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi? In what way do you think can these challenges be overcome?
16. Is the current national system for quality assurance adequate? What developments in quality assurance are in the pipeline to develop a coherent national QA system for the Malawi's higher education?
17. Are there any other issues related to the development and implementation of the quality assurance system for higher education you would like to mention?

Thank you very much

Interview Schedule for Senior Officials at NCHE & Members of National Technical Working Group

Introduction

Thank you for accepting to participate in the study. My name is Wanangwa W.N. Chikazinga, a PhD student at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom. I am conducting a study on the development of the national QA system for higher education in Malawi as part of the requirement for the award of PhD in Education. I will mainly ask you questions concerning the role of the Ministry of Education Science and Technology and NCHE in the development of the national QA system. The interview will take about one hour. As indicated on the information sheet and consent form, all the information that you will provide will be kept confidential and your identity will be anonymized. After the transcription of the interview, I will send you the transcript to verify the information that you will provide me in this interview. Would you please indicate whether you would mind being audio recorded? Feel free to ask me any question now and at any point during the interview.

Preliminary questions (fill answers in table)

<table>
<tr><td>Date of Interview</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Time</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Place</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Interviewee Code</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Interviewee Position</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Gender</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Institution</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">How long (years) have you worked in:</td><td>this institution</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>The current Position</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

- What position do you hold at the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)?
- How long have your worked with NCHE? And in your current position?
- Could you please tell me your role and main responsibilities?

Part A: Context of Influence

1. Could you please give me a background to the establishment of the National Council for higher Education (NCHE)? Probe
    a. What are the functions and main responsibilities of NCHE?
    b. Is there any difference between NCHE and the previous Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC) committee in the office of the president on quality assurance issues in higher education?
2. From your experience, what national contextual factors motivated the government to establish NCHE and the national QA system for higher education?
3. How and to what extent in your view have external (global and international) factors and agencies or organizations influenced the establishment of NCHE and the national QA system for higher education in Malawi?

Part B: Context of Polity Text Production

4. I hear NCHE was established by an Act of Parliament No 15 of 2011.

a. Were you involved in any way in the development of the NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011? If yes, could you please explain how this Act was developed?
b. Who were the key players involved? What role did they play in the development process?
c. Who funded the development of the NCHE Act? Who provided technical support?

5. What policy instruments/documents/ QA standards/guidelines/regulations/frameworks has the NCHE developed for assuring quality of higher education since its inception? Probe
    a. How were each of these policy instruments, standards or guidelines developed?
    b. Who were the key players (local and international) involved in the development of the policy requirements?
    c. What role did they play in the policy development process?
    d. Who funded the development of NCHE policy texts? Who provided technical support and how?
    e. Which countries/international organizations/agencies acted as sources of 'best practices' informing the development of the policy text? And why?
6. Which players were the most/least influential and why? Who else do you think should have been involved in the NCHE's policy development process? Why?
7. How and to what extent do you think that NCHE sufficiently consulted and engaged with the higher education community in developing the Quality policy instruments?
8. To what extent do you think that the policy instruments that NCHE has developed are valid and implementable in the local context of universities in Malawi? Could you explain?

Part C: Context of Practice or implementation

9. Now let us talk about how the national QA system operates in practice. How is the NCHE structured in terms of organization and management?
10. How is the concept of 'quality' and 'quality assurance' understood in the context of NCHE QA system framework?
11. What purposes is the QA system for higher education in Malawi deigned to serve?
12. What are the key QA processes of the national QA system? (i.e., institutional Audit, Assessment, accreditation?
13. How would you evaluate these processes based on your experience of the first circle of assessment and accreditation?
14. How is course approval and accreditation managed with respect to universities or colleges delivering a course quality assured overseas? P**robe:**
    a. Do universities and colleges deliver a programme in collaboration with an overseas provider? If yes, what QA processes are available for such delivery?

Part D: Context of policy Outcomes

15. To what extent do you think that the national QA system regulated by NCHE has brought changes to the higher education sector after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation? could you explain?
16. From your perspective, how has NCHE QA policy and procedures influenced QA practices in the higher education sector in terms of:
    i. Academic programme development

ii. Teaching and student support?
iii. Student learning and Assessment?
iv. Physical facilities & resources?
v. Staff complements?
vi. Governance and management?
vii. Research output by faculty?

17. What has been the implication for the national QA system in terms of the degree of state control and institutional autonomy? Probe
    a. Do you think NCHE's QA mechanisms provide sufficient interpretive space for institutions to devise their own QA systems-based self-evaluation?
    b. How do universities respond to NCHE's QA processes and requirements? (Positive or negative)
18. What do you think are the major challenges and constraints at national and institutional level in terms of implementing the QA system for higher education?
19. What do you believe are the necessary conditions and resources required for the effective implementation of the quality assurance system that really effect change in the quality of teaching and student learning?
20. How do you think can the current national QA policies and system be improved?
21. Are there any other issues related to the development and implementation of the NCHE standards and procedures you would like to mention?

Thank You very much

Interview Schedule for academic staff in case study universities

Introduction

Thank you for accepting to participate in the study. My name is Wanangwa W.N. Chikazinga, a PhD student at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom. I am conducting a study as part of the requirement for the award of PhD in Education. The study is about the development of the QA system for higher education in Malawi. My focus is mainly at national level to understand why and how the system has been developed; how it operates; and the influence it is having in the higher education sector. I selected your institutions as one of the case studies to understand the influence of the national QA system. This interview will be confidential. I am going to use codes instead of your name to ensure that you remain anonymous. With your permission I would record the interview so that I can be able to transcribe. Once I do, I will send you the transcript to verify. Feel free to ask me any question now and at any point during the interview.

Preliminary questions (fill answers in table)

Date of Interview		
Time		
Interviewee Code		
Interviewee Position		
Gender		
Employment type		
Institution		
Years worked in:	Higher education	
	Current institution	
	Current Position	
Teaching responsibility		
Distribution of work time		

- What is the type of your employment? Tenure or Fixed contract?
- How long have your worked in higher education? At this institution? And in your current position?
- What is teaching responsibility? What do you teach?
- How would you describe your typical working time in terms of the distribution between teaching, research and community engagement?

Part A: Context of Policy Text Production

1. Let us talk about your experience on how you have been assuring quality of teaching and learning in your institution before the establishment of NCHE.

What policies, methods and procedures were in place to assure quality in

i. Academic programme development (design)?
ii. Teaching and student support?
iii. Student learning and assessment?
iv. Staff compliment?
v. Research output by faculty?
vi. Administrative support?

2. How were these policies, methods and procedures for assuring quality of teaching and learning developed within the institution? Who initiated the policy development process? Who was involved?
3. Let us now talk about the national QA system and policy instruments. Which of the instruments that NCHE has developed are your aware of?
4. How and to what extent were you and other academics involved in the development of the NCHE QA policy instruments, standards and procedures? Probe
    i. NCHE Act No 15 of 2011?
    ii. Minimum standards for higher education institutions? (2015)
    iii. Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in Malawi's higher education institutions? (2013)
    iv. Standards for accreditation of Malawi's higher education institutions? (2013)
    v. Accreditation Evaluation Framework? (2015)
    vi. Assessment tool for higher education institutions? (2015)
    vii. Template for academic programme curriculum development and course/module specification? (2016).
    viii. Library standards for higher education? (2018)
    ix. Higher education ODeL framework? (2020)
    x. Draft higher education qualification framework? (2019)
5. Are you satisfied with the nature of your involvement? If not, how do you think yourself and other academics could have been engaged and why?

Part B: Context of Practice or Implementation

6. Let us talk about how the national QA operates in practice. What does 'quality' and 'quality assurance' in higher education mean to you? Do you think this is how it is reflected in NCHE procedures? Why?
7. Do you have to meet additional quality standards and procedures of any other organization in the country other than NCHE? If so which organization? Why and how?
8. What is your experience about your department and institutional preparation or self-assessment in readiness for quality assessment and accreditation by NCHE?
9. How would you evaluate the processes of the national QA system and accreditation framework based on the first cycle of audits, assessment, and accreditation processes at your institution? (Probe registration, accreditation processes, selection, training & conduct of reviewers)

Part C: Context of Outcomes/effects

10. Let us talk about the influence of the national QA system procedures. What changes has the NCHE policies and procedures brought to your department and institution after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation? Probe changes in terms of
    i. Academic programme development (design)?
    ii. Teaching and student support?
    iii. Student learning and assessment?
    iv. Staff compliment?
    v. Research output by faculty?
    vi. Administrative support?
11. Are there any changes in other institutional policies and practices and governance? If so what institutional policies and practices?

12. Do you believe that NCHE QA procedures are effective in improving quality of teaching and learning in your department and institution? Why? If not, how should quality assurance be carried out to effect improvement in teaching and learning?
13. How do you engage with quality assurance procedures brought by NCHE as academics? Do any of you (academics) resist? If so, how does your institution deal with the resistance?
14. How appropriate do you think is the relationship between quality assurance and general accountability of universities and academics to government and society? Probe:
    a. How and to what extent does this kind of accountability differ from those of academics?
    b. What changes if any do NCHE procedures bring to your professional autonomy (academic freedom) and engagement in decision making within your university?
15. To what extent do you agree in principle with the idea of an external quality assurance agency established by government assuring and maintaining quality in higher education? Why?
16. Are there any challenges or constraints you experience to meet your institutional benchmarks of quality and NCHE QA standards and procedures?
17. What do you believe are the necessary conditions required for effective implementation of the national quality assurance system that really effect change in quality of teaching and learning?
18. Do you have any suggestion about how the NCHE QA standards and procedures could be improved? Or do you have any other comment to make?

Thank you very Much

Interview Schedule for Deans of Faculty and Heads of Departments in case study universities

Introduction

Thank you for accepting to participate in the study. My name is Wanangwa W.N. Chikazinga, a PhD student at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom. I am conducting a study as part of the requirement for the award of PhD in Education. As I said, in this study I am looking at the development of the QA system for higher education in Malawi. My focus is mainly at national level to understand why and how the system and polices have been developed; How it operates; and the influence it is having in the higher education sector. I selected your institutions as one of the case studies to understand the influence of the national QA system. This interview will be confidential. I am going to use codes instead of your name to ensure that you remain anonymous. With your permission I would like to record this interview so that I can be able to transcribe. Once I do that, I will send you the transcript to verify. Feel free to ask me any question now and at any point during the interview.

Preliminary questions (fill answers in table)

<table>
<tr><td>Date of Interview</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Time</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Interviewee Code</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Gender (male/female)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Interviewee Position</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Name of Faculty</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Employment type</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Institution</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Years worked in:</td><td>Higher education</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Current institution</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Current Position</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Distribution of work time</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
</table>

- What is the type of your employment? Tenure or Fixed contract?
- How long have your worked in higher education? This institution? And in your current position?
- How is your typical working week? Or how would you distribute your work time in terms of teaching, research and community engagement, and administrative work? (%)
- What is your role and main responsibility as dean of faculty or head of department?

Part A: Context of Policy Text Production

1. Let us talk about your experience on how you have been assuring quality of teaching and learning in your institution before the establishment of NCHE.

What policies, methods and procedures were in place to assure quality in

i. Academic programme development (design)?
ii. Teaching and student support?
iii. Student learning and assessment?
iv. Staff compliment?
v. Research output by faculty?
vi. Administrative support?

2. How were these policies, methods and procedures for assuring quality of teaching and learning developed within the institution? Who initiated the policy development process? Who was involved?
3. Let us now talk about the national QA system and policy instruments. Which of the instruments (policies, standards, regulations or procedures) that NCHE has developed are your aware of?
4. How and to what extent were you and academics in your faculty involved in the development of the NCHE QA policy instruments, standards and procedures? Probe
   i. NCHE Act No 15 of 2011?
   ii. Minimum standards for higher education institutions? (2015)
   iii. Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in Malawi's higher education institutions? (2013)
   iv. Standards for accreditation of Malawi's higher education institutions? (2013)
   v. Accreditation Evaluation Framework? (2015)
   vi. Assessment tool for higher education institutions? (2015)
   vii. Template for academic programme curriculum development and course/module specification? (2016).
   viii. Library standards for higher education? (2018)
   ix. Higher education ODeL framework? (2020)
   x. Draft higher education qualification framework? (2019)
5. Are you satisfied with the nature of your involvement? If not, how do you think yourself and academics in your faculty could have been engaged and why?

Part B: Context of Practice or Implementation

6. Let us talk about how the national QA operates in practice. What does 'quality' and 'quality assurance' in higher education mean to you? Do you think this is how it is reflected in NCHE procedures? Why?
7. Do you have to meet additional quality standards and procedures of any other organization in the country other than NCHE? If so which organization? Why and how?
8. What is your experience about your faculty and institutional preparation or self-assessment in readiness for quality assessment and accreditation by NCHE?
9. How would you evaluate the processes of the national QA system and accreditation framework based on the first cycle of audits, assessment, and accreditation processes at your institution? (Probe registration, accreditation processes, selection, training & conduct of reviewers)

Part C: Context of Outcomes/effects

10. Let us talk about the influence of the national QA system procedures. What changes if any has the NCHE standards and procedures brought to your department and institution after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation? Probe changes in terms of
    i. Academic programme development (design)?
    ii. Teaching and student support?
    iii. Student learning and assessment?
    iv. Staff compliment?
    v. Research output by faculty?
    vi. Administrative support?

11. Are there any changes in other institutional policies and practices and governance? If so what institutional policies and practices?
12. Do you believe that NCHE QA procedures are effective in improving quality of teaching and learning in your department and institution? Why? If not, how should quality assurance be carried out to effect improvement in teaching and learning?
13. How do you and academics in your faculty engage with quality assurance procedures brought by NCHE? Do any of them resist? If so, how do you deal with the resistance?
14. How appropriate do you think is the relationship between quality assurance and general accountability of universities and academics to government and society? Probe:
    a. How and to what extent does this kind of accountability differ from those of academics?
    b. What changes if any do NCHE procedures bring to your professional autonomy (academic freedom) and engagement in decision making within your university?
15. To what extent do you agree in principle with the idea of an external quality assurance agency established by government assuring and maintaining quality in higher education? Why?
16. Are there any challenges or constraints you experience to meet your institutional benchmarks of quality and NCHE QA standards and procedures?
17. What do you believe are the necessary conditions required for effective implementation of the national quality assurance system that really effect change in quality of teaching and learning?
18. Do you have any suggestion about how the NCHE QA standards and procedures could be improved? Or do you have any other comment to make?

Thank you very Much

Interview schedule for senior university managers (vice chancellor, college principal, Registrar and Quality Assurance Director) in case study universities

Introduction

Thank you for accepting to participate in the study. My name is Wanangwa W.N. Chikazinga, a PhD student at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom. I am conducting a study as part of the requirement for the award of PhD in Education. As I said, in this study I am looking at the development of the QA system and policies for higher education in Malawi. My focus is mainly at national level to understand why and how the system and polices have been developed; How it operates; and the influence it is having in the higher education sector. I selected your institutions as one of the case studies to understand the influence of the national QA system. This interview will be confidential. I am going to use codes instead of your name to ensure that you remain anonymous. With your permission I would like to record this interview so that I can be able to transcribe. Once I do that, I will send you the transcript to verify. Feel free to ask me any question now and at any point during the interview.

Preliminary questions (fill answers in table)

<table>
<tr><td>Date of Interview</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Time</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Interviewee Code</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Gender (male/female)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Interviewee Position</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Employment type (tenure/contract)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Institution</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Years worked in:</td><td>Higher education</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Current institution</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Current Position</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Distribution of work time</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
</table>

- What is the type of your employment? Tenure or Fixed contract?
- How long have your worked in higher education? This institution? And in your current position?
- What is your role and main responsibility as dean of faculty or head of department?

Part A: Context of Policy Text Production

1. Let us talk about your experience on how you have been assuring quality of teaching and learning in your institution before the establishment of NCHE.
   What policies, methods and procedures were in place to assure quality in
   vii. Academic programme development (design)?
   viii. Teaching and student support?
   ix. Student learning and assessment?
   x. Staff compliment?
   xi. Research output by faculty?
   xii. Administrative support?
2. How were these policies, methods and procedures for assuring quality of teaching and learning developed within the institution? Who initiated the policy development process? Who was involved?

3. What systems and processes were in place in your university to implement these institutional policies, methods, procedures before the establishment of NCHE?
4. Let us now talk about the national QA system and policy instruments. Which of the instruments (policies, standards, regulations or procedures) that NCHE has developed are your aware of?
5. How and to what extent were you and academics in your faculty involved in the development of the NCHE QA policy instruments, standards and procedures? Probe
    i. NCHE Act No 15 of 2011?
    ii. Minimum standards for higher education institutions? (2015)
    iii. Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in Malawi's higher education institutions? (2013)
    iv. Standards for accreditation of Malawi's higher education institutions? (2013)
    v. Accreditation Evaluation Framework? (2015)
    vi. Assessment tool for higher education institutions? (2015)
    vii. Template for academic programme curriculum development and course/module specification? (2016).
    viii. Library standards for higher education? (2018)
    ix. Higher education ODeL framework? (2020)
    x. Draft higher education qualification framework? (2019)

Probe: Are you satisfied with the nature of your involvement? If not, how do you think could you have been engaged and why?

6. How and to what extent do you think that NCHE sufficiently consulted and engaged with the higher education community, including your university in developing the national QA system standards and procedures? **Probe:**
    a. Who participated in the consultative meetings? Academic unit manager? Ordinary Academics? Students?
    b. If you can remember, what was the general response from your university? Are there any substantial changes that NCHE made as a result of the responses?

Part B: Context of Practice or Implementation

7. Let us talk about how the national QA operates in practice. What does 'quality' and 'quality assurance' in higher education mean to you? Do you think this is how it is reflected in NCHE procedures? Why?
8. What is your experience about your institutional preparation or self-assessment in readiness for quality assessment and accreditation by NCHE?
9. How would you evaluate the processes of the national QA system and accreditation framework based on the first cycle of audits, assessment, and accreditation processes at your institution? (Probe registration, accreditation processes, selection, training & conduct of reviewers)

Part C: Context of Outcomes/effects

10. Let us talk about the influence of the national QA system procedures. What changes if any has the NCHE standards and procedures brought to your institution after the first cycle of assessment and accreditation?
11. Are there any changes in other institutional policies and practices and governance? If so what institutional policies and practices?

12. Do you think that NCHE QA procedures improves quality of teaching and learning in your institution? Could you please explain?
13. Do you think that NCHE's QA mechanisms provide sufficient interpretive space for your university to devise its own quality assurance mechanisms? If so, how?
14. What changes/influence do you think that national QA procedures bring to the relationship between academics and university management in terms of decision-making?
15. How do you encourage staff to engage with the national QA procedures in your institution? Do any of them resist? If so, how do you deal with the resistance?
16. To what extent do you agree in principle with the idea of an external quality assurance agency established by government assuring and maintaining quality in higher education? Why?
17. Are there any challenges or constraints you experience to meet your institutional benchmarks of quality and NCHE QA standards and procedures?
18. What do you believe are the necessary conditions required for effective implementation of the national quality assurance system that really effect change in quality of teaching and learning?
19. Do you have any suggestion about how the NCHE QA standards and procedures could be improved? Or do you have any other comment to make?

Thank you very Much

Appendix III: Document List

Setting	Institution	No	Documents
Global or International & Regional	The World Bank	1	Higher education: the lessons of experience, 1994
		2	Priorities and strategies for higher education: A World Bank review, 1995
		3	Revitalizing universities in Africa, strategies and guidelines, 1997
		4	World Bank Report: knowledge for development, 1998/99
		5	Higher education in developing countries, peril or promise, 2000
		6	Constructing knowledge societies: new challenges for tertiary education, 2002
		7	Accelerating catch-up: tertiary education for growth in Sub-Sahara Africa', 2009
		8	The education system in Malawi, 2010
		9	Improving higher education in Malawi for competitiveness in the global economy, 2016
	UNESCO	1	World conference on higher education, higher education in the twenty-first century, vision and action, Paris, 1998
		2	International conference on accreditation, quality assurance and recognition of qualification in higher education in Africa, Nairobi, Kenya 2006
		3	External quality assurance of higher education in Anglophone Africa: Report of an IIEP distance education course 25 September – 22 December 2006
		4	World conference on higher education: the new dynamics of higher education and research for societal change and development, Paris' 2009
		5	Strengthening quality assurance in higher education: UNESCO-Shenzhen project in the 10 countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, The Gambia, Togo, and Zambia, 2016-2018
	European Union (EU)	1	Bologna declaration of 19 June 1999. Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education
		2	Prague Communique. Towards the European Higher Education Area, Communique of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of higher education in Prague, May 2001**.**
		3	Berlin Communique. Realising the European Higher Education Area: communique of the conference of Ministers responsible for higher education in Berlin, September 2003.
		4	Bergen communique. The European higher education area -achieving the goals. Communique of the conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education, Bergen, May 2005.
		5	London Communique. Towards the European higher education area: responding to challenges in a globalized world, London, May 2007.

		6	Leaven & Louvain-la-Neuve Communique. The Bologna process 2020- the European higher education area in the new decade. Communique of the conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education, Leuven & Louvan-la-Neuve, April 2009
		7	Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European higher education Area, March 2010.
		8	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European higher education Area (ESG), 2005, 2015.
		9	European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF), 2008
	African Union (AU)	1	Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African State - UNESCO Arusha Convention 1981
		2	Second decade of education for Africa (2006-2015) plan of action
		3	Continental education strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016-2025
		4	Report of the Third Ordinary Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers of Education (COMEDAF III), 2007.
		5	The African higher education harmonization strategy, 2007
		6	African quality rating mechanism (AQRM), 2007, 2013
		7	Revised convention on the recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas, degrees and other qualification in higher education in African States, (UNESCO Addis Convention), 2014
		8	Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) Initiative, 2015-2018
		9	Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA2) Initiative, 2019-2022
		10	African standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ASG-QA)', 2018
		11	Tuning Africa initiative: Tuning and harmonization of higher education, the African experience, 2010-2014
	SADC	1	Consolidated Text of the SADC Treaty, 2011
		2	Regional indicative strategic development plan (RISDP) 2005-2010
		3	Regional indicative strategic development plan (RISDP) 2015-2020
		4	SADC 1997 Protocol on Education and Training
		5	SADC regional qualification framework (SADC-RQF), 2017
		6	SADC regional open and distance learning policy framework, 2012

National	Government of Malawi, MoEST	1	Vision 2020, the national long-term development perspective for Malawi, 2000
		2	Malawi poverty reduction strategy paper, 2002
		3	Malawi economic growth strategy, volume II main report, 2004
		4	Malawi growth and development strategy, from poverty to prosperity, 2006-2011
		5	Malawi Growth and development strategy (MGDS II), 2011-2016
		6	Malawi growth and development strategy (MGDS III), 2017-2022
		7	Malawi Vision 2063, An inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation, 2020
		8	Malawi education Act No 21 of 2013
		9	Government of Malawi, national education policy, 2016
		10	National education sector plan, policy & investment framework (PIF), 2000-2012
		11	National education sector plan (NESP), 2007 – 2017
		12	National education sector investment plan (NESIP), 2020-2030
		13	Report on the public sector reform sectoral conference, August 2017
		14	A report on de-linking of the constituent colleges of university of Malawi by Taskforce on de-linking of UNIMA college, 2018
	Malawi Parliament	1	Malawi national assembly, daily debates (Hansard). Fifth meeting-forty second session. Twenty forth day Thursday, 23rd June 2011 -Bill No. 31 of 2010 National Council for Higher Education
		2	Malawi national assembly, daily debates (Hansard). Fifth meeting-forty second session. Twenty fifth day Friday 24th June 2011 -Bill No. 31 of 2010 National Council for Higher Education
	NCHE	1	NCHE Act No 15 of 2011
		2	Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in Malawi's higher education institutions, 2013
		3	Standards for accreditation of Malawi's higher education institutions, 2013
		4	Assessment form for higher education institutions, 2015
		5	Accreditation Evaluation framework, 2015
		6	Minimum standards for higher education institutions', 2015
		7	Library standards for higher education, 2018
		8	Draft Higher education qualifications framework, 2019
		9	Higher Education ODeL Framework, 2020
		10	Higher education quality assurance framework for Malawi, 2019
		11	NCHE Strategic plan 2015-2020
		12	Template for programme curriculum development and course/module specification, 2016

		13	Application form for provisional registration to operate an institution of higher learning
		14	Press release: Update on new registered higher education institutions and ne academic programmes of institutions, August 2016
		15	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, October 2016
		16	Press statement: Unregistered higher education institution, January 2018'
		17	Press release: Accredited higher education institution and programmes as of April 2018
		18	Press release: Institutional audits, registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, November 2018
		19	Press release: Registered and accredited higher education institutions in Malawi, July 2019
		20	Press statement: offering of higher education and awarding qualifications in Malawi by unregistered institutions, January 2020
		21	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, January 2020
		22	Press statement: Institutional inquiry on Exploits University, April 2020
		23	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, July 2020
		24	Press release: Accredited higher education institutions and programmes as of August 2020
		25	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, March 2021
		26	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, April 2021
		27	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, October 2021
		28	Press release: Registration and accreditation of institution and programmes, December 2021
		29	Press release: registered and accredited higher education institutions and programmes, January 2022
Institutional/ local	CS1-PvtU-Private University	1	The Charter of CS1-PvtU private university
		2	Strategic development plan 2013-2018
		3	University common regulation for all undergraduate programmes, 2014
		4	University common regulation for all postgraduate programmes, 2014
		5	NCHE feedback report on accreditation, 1st November 2016
		6	Institutional improvement plan submitted to the national council for higher education (NCHE) in response to the accreditation recommendations, 23rd January 2017
		7	Annual quality assurance report submitted to the national council for higher education (NCHE), July 2018
		8	Staff compliment and qualifications

		9	Staff development policy
		10	Research Policy
		11	Quality assurance Policy
	CS2 & CS3-PubU public university colleges	1	University of Malawi (UNIMA) Act of 1998
		2	Vice chancellor's office four-year report 3 December 2013 to 30 November 2017
		3	University policies, procedures and regulations, 2009
		4	Policy on research and consultancy, 2006
		5	Research and consultancy policy, 2016
		6	Teaching, learning and assessment policy, 2015
		7	Procedures and regulations on student evaluation, internal moderation of assessment instruments and outcomes, 2009
		8	Guidelines for project/dissertation assessment, 2009
		9	University qualification framework and sub-degree awards, 2011
		10	Quality assurance and enhancement policy, 2009
		11	Policy on development of academic programmes, 2009
		12	Postgraduate study policy, 2016
		13	Student-Lecturer Course Evaluation questionnaire, 2009
		14	University inclusion policy, 2009
		15	Policy on external examination and academic consultations, 2009

Appendix IV: An Example of Coding and themes using Research Question One

The steps of analysing interviewed data included transcription, organizing data into files, coding and generating themes. Nvivo 12 computer software was used to analyse data. The corresponding procedure of coding and theme identification was basically identifying nodes. The example given is for research question one: What external (global) and internal (national) factors influenced the need for the formal QA system for higher education in Malawi to be identified, justified and placed onto the government policy agenda?

Figure A4.1: Codes and nodes display in Nvivo 12

1. **An Example of Coding extract of interview transcript**

Interviewer: **Could you please give me a background to the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)**

Interviewee: I would say that it came to a point where the government felt that there was need for an autonomous body that would provide oversight role on the development of the higher education sector in Malawi. The council was established by an Act of parliament number 15 of 2011. Of course, it started its activities in 2012 with the appointment of the first council in February 2012. Before that the government had a mechanism in place for regulating the higher education sector. I think there was a body known as the credential and evaluation committee. In short CEC. This

body was housed or based in the department of human resource management and development (DHRMD) in the office of president and cabinet. It was just an ad hoc committee that the government had put in place to review new institutions and their programmes before they could commence. It didn't have I would say a legal mandate. It was not set up by an Act of parliament. It didn't have structures that would legitimate its operations. So, the coming up of the National Council for higher education was in a way intended to address the gap that was and is still there. But we can also say it was a response to the regional trends. You know looking around the SADC region. Not only the SADC, but I would say maybe throughout Africa, it was more like a window of change where countries and governments were setting up national bodies to regulate the higher education sector in recognition of the growth. In our case here until the early 90s there was only one university and a few tertiary education institutions. But with the liberalization of higher education many interested parties - private individuals and religious bodies were coming up to set up institutions of higher learning. So, it was felt that there was more or less like a vacuum. There was a need for a body that would provide a framework and regulate the sector. So, in short that is what I can say as a background to the establishment of the national council for higher education. But we have also to recognize that the council itself is more like an agent of the ministry of education because technically we work on behalf of the ministry of education.

Commented [WC1]: Code: Regulation problem arising from the weakness of the Credential and Evaluation Committee (CEC)

Commented [WC2]: Code: Response to regional trends/learning from other countries in Africa and the SADC region

Commented [WC3]: Code: Liberalisation of higher education and growth of private universities

Interviewer: **You mentioned about regional trends and liberalization of higher education. Are there any other global or international factors that could have influenced the government to establish NCHE and the QA system?**

Interviewee: Of course, we know there is that protocol on education and training at SADC level, to which Malawi is a signatory. But if you are going to talk about protocols then it is mainly the harmonization processes. That's what would have triggered the government. At least there is no documented evidence that we can say the establishment of the council was I think inspired or informed by this particular protocol at SADC

Commented [WC4]: Code: SADC Protocol on Education and Training

level. But we know there has been that trend across the region. If you go to the neighbouring countries, you find they have set up bodies similar to the NCHE. We can't however pinpoint that Malawi had to do it because of this. But the fact that we see it happening in the 2000's we can conclude that it is in a way informed by the regional trends. I also know now that at African Union level there are those initiatives to harmonize quality assurance processes. In fact, now there are African Standards and guidelines for higher education. They are also starting to develop the continental qualification framework and even to set up a continental quality assurance agency to oversee the operations of quality assurance agencies around Africa. In a way if a country does not have a body for quality assurance, that country would be compelled to set up one to participate effectively. Of course, we know there is that Addis Convention, and there was once the Arusha Convection, but Malawi has not ratified for example the Addis convention. By the way it is supposed to but Malawi has not yet done so. Many counties in Africa have not also ratified. It is only a handful that have gone that way

Commented [WC5]: **Code:** Harmonisation of higher education systems by SADC

Commented [WC6]: **Code:** Response to regional trends/learning from other countries in SADC region

Commented [WC7]: **Code:** Harmonisation of higher education systems and QA processes by African Union

Commented [WC8]: **Code:** Ratification of African Conventions and Treaties – Addis Convention

QA Policy Influences- Global National & Local

Name	Files	References	Created On
QA system Purpose	0	0	11/02/202
Global & Regional Actors & Mechanisms	0	0	11/02/202
W. Bank- Funding QA Infrustracture & Tools Projects	7	13	07/02/2021
Global & Regional QA networks	3	8	07/02/2021
SADC - Standardisation & Hamonization	8	11	07/02/2021
Africa Union- Standardisation & Hamonization	5	7	16/02/2021
W.Bank -Technical Support Consultants	1	3	16/02/2021
W.Bank-Education Sector Studies	1	1	16/02/2021
UNESCO- Funding Capacity Trainings & Conferences	4	7	17/02/2021
UNESCO -Standard Setting Convention	2	3	17/05/2021
W.Bank -Funding Study Tours	1	2	17/05/2021
EU & Bologna Process - Norm Setting Standards	2	3	17/05/2021
Global & National Structural Factors	0	0	15/02/202
Liberalization of HE	10	18	15/02/2021
Funding Patterns	6	8	16/02/2021
Internationalisation	10	15	16/02/2021
Recognition of Qualifications	9	10	27/05/2021
Affiliation or Partnerships	1	1	27/05/2021
Cross-border Providers	2	2	27/05/2021
Internationalization of Curricula	1	1	27/05/2021
Expansion of Higher Education	5	7	19/02/2021
Graduates Employability	5	9	07/02/2021
New-Managerialsim & Demand for Accountability	4	8	17/05/2021
Role of State in Regulation	7	17	07/02/2021
QA Development in Other Countries	8	13	17/05/2021
Global Competition	3	3	17/05/2021
Marketisation of Public Universities	1	1	17/05/2021
Learning from Regional Trends	7	10	27/05/2021

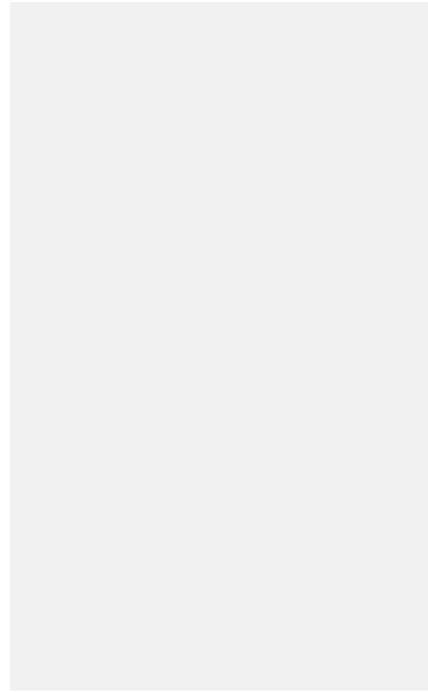
Figure A4.2: An example of coding (Initial Random nodes)

2. An Example of Final generated themes for research question one

Final Themes for QA Policy Trajectory in Malawi

Name	Files	References	Created On
Global Context of Influence	0	0	17/11/2021 16:16
Learning from Global Experiences & Other Coun	6	12	17/11/2021 16:17
Regionalization & Harmonization of Higher Edu	7	14	17/11/2021 16:18
International Organizations	8	21	17/11/2021 16:18
Internationalization of Higher Education	0	0	17/11/2021 16:18
Need to internationalize programme & curri	5	6	17/11/2021 16:25
Affliation and Partnerships	2	2	17/11/2021 16:26
Comparability & Recognition of Qualificaiton	10	11	17/11/2021 16:26
National Context of Influence	0	0	17/11/2021 16:19
Liberalisation & Growth of Private Universities	0	0	17/11/2021 16:19
Regulation Issue	10	14	17/11/2021 16:24
Quality Issue	11	17	17/11/2021 16:24
Craftiness	3	3	17/11/2021 16:24
Expansion of HE amidst declining funding	9	15	17/11/2021 16:20
Relevance & Employability	7	11	17/11/2021 16:20
Demands for New-Managerialism	16	36	17/11/2021 16:21
Governance Refrom of HE System	0	0	17/11/2021 16:21
Governance Structures	4	9	17/11/2021 16:23
Public Funding Mechanism	3	7	17/11/2021 16:23
Changing Role of State in QA	6	10	17/11/2021 16:21

Figure A4.3: An example of final generated themes and subthemes



Appendix V: Ethical Approval for the Study

Appendix reducted for having personal details such as names, signatures and addresses.

Appendix VI: Certification of discharge from COVID 19 Quarantine

Telephone No.: 265 726 466/464
Telefax No.: 265 727817
Telex No..
E-Mail. lilongwedho@malawi.

Lilongwe District Health Office
P O. Box 1274
Lilongwe
Malawi

Date: 15 - 04 - 2020

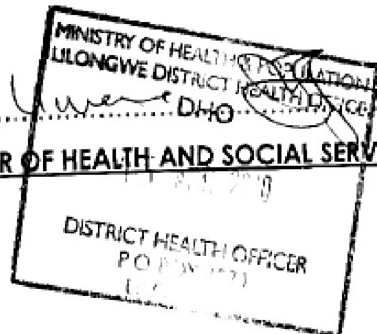
CERTIFICATION OF DISCHARGE FROM QUARANTINE

This is to certify that

Mr/~~Mrs/Miss~~ WAMANGWA W.M. CHIKAZINGA has been discharged from 14 days of monitored quarantine.

He/She arrived in the Country from UNITED KINGDOM on the 31st MARCH, 2020 and has been monitored for symptom development by the Lilongwe District Health Office rapid response team.

During this period, he/she has displayed no symptoms and is therefore now eligible to leave house and perform normal daily duties.



Dr. .... DHO

For: DIRECTOR OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES - LL

Appendix VII: Formal permission to access sites granted by Institutions

School of Education
35 Berkeley Square
BS8 1 JA
Bristol
www.bristol.ac.uk

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, UK
Woburn House
20-24 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HF
United Kingdom

Letter to Institutions Seeking Access

Date: DD/MM/YY
[Full name of controlling officer]
[Position within Institution]
[Contact information]

Dear [Title/Surname]

I write to kindly request your permission to conduct my research study at you institution and invite you and other members of staff to participate in the study as an interviewee. The study cannot be completed without the involvement of your institution, and the help of a number of people. I trust that as an experienced professional/policy official contributing to the higher education sector in Malawi, your views in relation to the topic of this research would be of immense value to my study.

I am a Commonwealth Scholar, currently on study leave from the post of lecturer in education at the University of Malawi, Kamuzu College of Nursing. The research project is part of my doctoral studies at the University of Bristol, School of Education in the UK. It is entitled: "The Case Study of the development of the national formal quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi: A policy trajectory analysis". The study aims to research the policy processes in the development of the national quality assurance (QA) system and practices for the higher education system in Malawi. I intend to explore how and why the national QA system emerged. How the QA system policy texts have been constructed. How it operates to assure the quality of higher education, its influences within universities and across the higher education sector, and how universities respond to the QA system procedures. Attached is the information sheet which provides more details about the research

This study will be significant in developing a better understanding of critical issues relating to the development of the QA system, the influence it has on the higher education sector and how universities respond. The study is considered timely and relevant considering that NCHE has just concluded the first cycle of assessment and accreditation of universities and their programmes. The empirical evidence generated I believe would contribute immensely to further development and strengthening of the national QA system in Malawi.

The data from participants and your institutions will be held confidentially and anonymous. The identity will be replaced by identification codes in the transcription, reporting and any other form of publication of my research. This will protect the reputation of your institutions

and its staff. If you have any enquiries about my research, please feel free to contact me. I look forward to your favorable response, and sincerely appreciate your kind attention.

Yours faithfully,
Wanangwa W. N. Chikazinga
Tel : [………]
Email : wc17174@bristol.ac.uk
Address: School of Education, 35 Berkeley Square, Bristol, BS8 1JA

Appendices of formal authorisation letters reducted for having personal details such as names, signatures and addresses

Appendix VIII: Invitation letter to participants, information sheet and consent form

School of Education
35 Berkeley Square
BS8 1 JA
Bristol
www.bristol.ac.uk

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, UK
Woburn House
20-24 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HF
United Kingdom

Letter of Invitation to Participant

Date: DD/MM/YY
[Full name of participant]
[Contact information of the participant]

Dear [Title/Surname]

I write to kindly invite you to participate in my research study as an interviewee. The study cannot be completed without your help. I believe that your views and suggestions in relation to the topic of this research would be of immense value to the study.

The research project is part of my doctoral studies at the University of Bristol, School of Education in the UK. It is entitled: "The Case Study of the development of the national formal quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi: A policy trajectory analysis". The study aims to understand the policy processes in the development of the national quality system for higher education in Malawi. I intend to explore how and why the national QA System emerged. How the QA system texts have been constructed. How it operates to assure quality of higher education, its influences within universities and across the higher education sector, and how universities respond to the system and policies. Attached is the information sheet which provides more details about the research, as well as Ethical approval documents, and permission to conduct the study at your institution.

I know you must be very busy and I will ensure that the interview does not occupy too much of your time. It would take the maximum of 60 minutes. Please note that all the data gathered during the interview will be treated confidentially, stored securely and only accessed by myself. The data will be used only for the purposes of the study. All your information will anonymous. Your identity will be replaced by identification codes in the transcription, reporting and any other form of publication of my research. A full transcription of the interview will be sent to you for verification.

No risks as a result of your participation in this study are expected. To protect you from Covid-19 infection, upon arrival from the University of Bristol (United Kingdom) on 31st March 2020, I strictly adhered to the covid-19 prevention protocol for Malawi. I was on 14 days monitored quarantine for Covid-19 symptom development by the Ministry of Health. I was visited and assessed on 1st, 7th, 9th and 14th April 2020. On all occasions I was found negative, hence discharged on 15th April 2020 as indicated in the attached certification of discharge. I will ensure that the Malawi government Covid-19 protocol is followed during interviews.

Therefore, if you accept this invitation to participate, I would appreciate if you could kindly let me know at your earliest convenience, and we can negotiate a mutually convenient date, time and place/mode of interview. I have also sent the written consent form so that you can sign it. Should you have any enquiries on any aspect of my study, please do not hesitate to either contact me or my supervisors Professor Bruce Macfarlane, and Dr. Lisa Lucas, at bruce.macfarlane@bristol.ac.uk and Lisa.Lucas@bristol.ac.uk..

I look forward to your favorable response, and sincerely appreciate your kind attention.

Yours faithfully,

Wanangwa W. N. Chikazinga
Tel : […],
Email : wc17174@bristol.ac.uk

INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: "The case study of the development of the national formal quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi: A policy trajectory analysis".

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with necessary information about this study and invite you to participate as an interviewee. I am a Commonwealth Scholar, currently on study leave from the post of lecturer in education at the University of Malawi, Kamuzu College of Nursing. I am studying for a PhD in Education at University of Bristol, in the UK. My research is being supervised by ***Professor Bruce Macfarlane***, and ***Dr. Lisa Lucas***, in the School of Education.

Aim of Study: This study aims to critically analyze the policy processes in the development of the national quality assurance (QA) system for higher education in Malawi. The study attempts to answer how and why the national QA System emerged in the Malawian higher education sector. What global, national and local policy influences initiated its development. How the QA system texts have been developed. How the nation QA system operates to assure quality of higher education in Malawi, including its influences within universities and across the higher education sector?

Benefits: The literature on QA reveal that it is both a theoretical and practical challenge to develop and effectively implement QA policies and systems for higher education. This study will be significant in developing a better understanding of critical issues relating to the development of the QA system, the influence it has on the higher education sector and how universities respond. The study is considered timely and relevant considering that the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has just concluded the first cycle of assessment and accreditation of universities and their programmes. The empirical evidence generated I believe will contribute immensely to further development and strengthening of the national QA system in Malawi

Study Design: The emergence of the QA system for higher education in Malawi following establishment of the NCHE by Act of Parliament Number 15 of 2011 provides the national

context for the study. The NCHE commenced its operations in 2013 and since then it has developed policy instruments that constitute the 'ensemble of policy instruments' currently steering the higher education system in Malawi and conducted the first cycle of assessment and accreditation of both public and private universities and their programmes. This study takes a macro (system) level analysis of the QA system development and implementation championed by NCHE. It would be difficult if not impossible to focus on NCHE processes without considering the responses of higher education institutions (HEIs). As NCHE is responsible for QA in the higher education sector, its functions are largely looked into on the basis of circumstances that prevail at the micro-level within HEIs. Therefore, multiple-case studies of one private university, and two public university colleges were included to examine the influences of the QA system and practices in HEIs. Semi-structured interviews with policy actors and document analysis are used to gather data on the QA system development and implementation processes.

Procedures and Ethics

Participation in the study is voluntary. If you decide to participate you will still have the right to abstain from answering any particular question or withdraw from the study at any time. No risks to participants due to participation in this study are expected. A written consent form is necessary for my study. Therefore, if you agree to participate, I will request you to sign the attached written consent form.

Please note that for the sake of accuracy of the data collection, interviews will be recorded with the digital voice recorder with your consent. But even if consent is granted, participants have the right to demand that voice recording be stopped at any time during the interview. All the data gathered during the different phases of the study will be treated confidentially, stored securely and only accessible to the researcher. The data will be used only for the purposes of the study in compliance to the UK, Data Protection Act of 25th May 2018, together with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

All participant information and that of institutions will be anonymous. Your identity will be replaced by identification codes in the transcription, reporting and any other form of publication of my research. This will protect your reputation and that of your institution. On completion of my studies a copy of the completed thesis will be kept in the University of Bristol Library. A copy each of the thesis will be presented to your institutions. All the raw materials including the audio recording will be kept securely under lock and key at the University of Bristol, school of education. After the recommended period for storing the data is over, all the raw materials will be securely disposed off, according to guidelines provided for by the University of Bristol.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Bristol, School of Education Research Ethics committee - REF:100225 and the National Committee on Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH) in Malawi – REF: No. P.04/20/478. If you have any questions at any time, regarding any aspect of this study, in the course of my research study, you could contact me or my supervisors at bruce.macfarlane@bristol.ac.uk and Lisa.Lucas@bristol.ac.uk or the Chairpersons of Research Ethics Committees at University of Bristol, School of Education at a.williams@bristol.ac.uk or Secretariat, National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, National Commission for Science and Technology, Lingadzi House, City Centre, P/Bag B303, Capital City, Lilongwe 3, Malawi at ncrsh@ncst.mw

I will appreciate it very much if you accept this request and are willing to be my interviewee.

Wanangwa W. N. Chikazinga
Tel: …………………
Email: wc17174@bristol.ac.uk

Informed Consent Form

Informed consent form for a doctoral research study entitled: "the Case Study of the development of the national formal quality assurance system for higher education in Malawi: A policy trajectory analysis".

I have read and understand the study information, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason.

I understand that taking part in the study involves audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and that no potential risks as a result of my participation in the study are expected.

I understand that information I provide will be used for academic purposes, as part of the doctoral studies for the researcher. Personal information collected about me that identify me, will remain confidential, only be accessed by the researcher, and that my identity and that of my institution will be anonymized by replacing it with identification codes and pseudonyms.

Signatures

________________________________:____________________:________________

Name of Participant (Capital letters) Signature Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

________________________________:____________________:________________

Name of Researcher (Capital Letters) Signature Date

Appendix IX: Development of Library Standards for Higher Education in Malawi

The *Library Standards for Higher Education* were published by NCHE in 2018. These standards form part of the "quality assurance standards for the establishment, standardization and accreditation of HEIs" (NCHE, 2018, p. 3). They aim to assure that libraries effectively and efficiently contribute to achievement of the goals of the institution by promoting good governance and management structures and a conducive academic environment for students and academic staff. There are eighteen library standards with corresponding thematic areas and detailed guidelines for each standard (Table 5).

Table 5: Library Standard for Higher Education in Malawi.

Library Standards for Higher Education	
1. Strategic Plan	10. ICT Infrastructure and Automation
2. Vision, Mission and Objectives	11. Information Literacy and Competency
3. Infrastructure	12. Library Services
4. Administrative Structure	13. External Relations
5. Library Staffing	14. Open and Distance Learning Library Services
6. Professional Values	15. Health, Safety and Security
7. Library Information Resources	16. Library Budget
8. Organization of Library Resources	17. Monitoring & Evaluation of Library Effectiveness
9. Access to Library Resources	18. Library Policies

Source: NCHE (2018). Library Standards for Higher Education. Lilongwe: NCHE

The NCHE engaged a team of librarians from some of the major libraries in Malawi to develop the Library Standards. The team constituted eleven librarians: four from private universities; five from public universities; one from National Library Services, and a documentation officer from National Commission for Science and Technology (NCST)(NCHE, 2018). Similar to the development of the ODeL framework, two librarians indicated that they did not conduct any consultations with the primary users of library services within universities. Rather, three policy workshops were organized by NCHE to develop the Library Standards. The first one was held at Golden Peacock hotel in Lilongwe from 4th to 5th April 2017. The team conducted a desk review of library standards from other countries particularly Philippines, Kenya and Zimbabwe, and standards by the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (https://www.ala.org/acrl). The team also reviewed existing Malawi library policy guidelines and procedures from their institutions and collectively deliberated on their experiences. This informed the selection of eighteen key components of library services which were used to develop the draft library standards. The second workshop held at Linde Motel in Mponela, Dowa district from 19th to 20th February 2018 aimed to finalize the Library Standards. The team developed detailed standards and guidelines for each of the eighteen components or thematic areas and aligned the library standards with the Minimum standards for higher education. The library standards were then submitted to NCHE, and subsequently adopted and approved by the Council in 2018. The final meeting was also held at Golden Peacock hotel in Lilongwe, where the library standards were

disseminated. The meeting was attended by librarians and registrars from HEIs, who were expected to take the information and relay to their respective institutions (CS2-PubU-R).

Appendix X: Application for registration of higher education institution

National Council for Higher Education
Application for Registration to Operate an Institution of Higher Education

Please fill all items on this form electronically, append attachments and submit to: registration@nche.ac.mw. Then print out ONE copy, initial every page, obtain signatures of senior officers and validation by a notary public on the last page and post to: The Chief Executive Officer, National Council for Higher Education, Private Bag B371, Lilongwe 3, Attn: Provisional Registration.

1. Proposed University/College:
   (a) Name

   (b) Incorporation (Attach a copy of the Constitution or Articles of Association, plus a copy of registration with the Registrar of Companies or NGO Board)

Chairperson of the Council/Board (Attach copy of identity document):

Secretary of the Council/Board (Attach copy of identity document):

Members of the Council/Board and their Designations (Attach copy of identity document for each person):

Date of Incorporation/Registration:

Owners/Shareholders of the Institution (Attach copy of identity document for each person):

Affiliation (specify whether religious, not-for-profit, or for-profit):

---

2. Contact Information (a)
Postal Address:

   (b) Physical Address:

(c) Fax Number:

(d) E-Mail Address:

(e) Website:

(f) Telephone Lines:

Fixed:

Mobile:

3. Proposed Programmes Information

(a) Area(s) of focus for the proposed institution

(b) Proposed programme(s), mode(s) of delivery and enrolment

Programme	**Mode of delivery**	**Enrolment**

(c) Briefly describe the generic criteria for student admission into each programme

4. Infrastructure to Support the Delivery of Higher Education (a) Facilities available

Facility	**Number of Units**	**Seating capacity**
Classroom/ lecture theatres		
Laboratories		
Computer laboratories		
Specialized studios (specify)		
Auditorium/ Hall		
Library		
Cafeteria		
Accommodation (bed space, by sex)		
Internet connectivity bandwidth (Mbps)		
Sanitation facilities (toilets and bathrooms, by sex)		
Sports and recreation facilities		
Health facilities		
Other (please specify)		

(b) Facilities in support of people with disabilities.

----

5. Human resources for the delivery of higher education

(a) Full time academic staff members (for each programme, attach list of names with details of sex and qualifications, including where obtained and year)

Programme	Doctorate	Masters	Bachelors	Diplomas	Total

(b) Part-time academic staff members (for each programme, attach list of names with details of sex and qualifications, including where obtained and year)

Programme	Doctorate	Masters	Bachelors	Diplomas	Total

(c) Technical and support staff (for each programme, attach list of names with details of sex and qualifications, including where obtained and year)

Programme	Doctorate	Masters	Bachelors	Diplomas/ Certificates	Total

(d) Administrative staff (for each department/section, attach list of names with details of sex and qualifications, including where obtained and year)

Department/ Section	Doctorate	Masters	Bachelors	Diplomas	Total

6. Other Administrative Details

(a) Names of Council members for the proposed institution.

Name	Highest qualification	Area of specialization

(b) Principal Officers of the proposed institution. (Attach an organogram.)

Name	Position	Highest qualification
	Chancellor or equivalent	
	Vice Chancellor or equivalent	

	Director of Academic Affairs or equivalent	
	Registrar or equivalent	
	Finance Director or equivalent	
	Legal Counsel	
	Librarian	

7. Finance Structure

Please describe briefly how the institution shall be financed, including student fee structure. (Attach a business plan that indicates that the institution shall remain a going concern.)

……………………………………………………………………………………………

8. Signatures of Senior Officers

(a) Chairperson of Governing Council

Name: ………………………………………………………………………………

Signature: ……………………………………………………………………………

Date: ……………………………………………………………………………………

(b) Vice-Chancellor

Name: ………………………………………………………………………………

Signature: ……………………………………………………………………………

Date: ……………………………………………………………………………………

(c) Registrar

Name: ………………………………………………………………………………

Signature: ……………………………………………………………………………

Date: ……………………………………………………………………………………

Validation by notary public:

Print out ONE copy of this application, initial every page, obtain signatures of senior officers and validation by a notary public on this page and post to: The Chief Executive Officer, National Council for Higher Education, Private Bag B371, Lilongwe 3, Attn: Provisional Registration.

Appendix XI: Application form for Accreditation of institution and programmes

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

(Form 2)

APPLICATION FOR ACCREDITATION

1. Name of higher education institution: ……………………………………………………………………………………………………

2. Short form for name of the higher education institution ……………………………………………………………………………

3. Physical Address: ………..

   ……

4. Postal Address ……………………………………………………………………… ………………………………………………………………..

5. Telephone No: …………………. Fax No: ……………………… E-mail: …………………………………………………..

6. Contact person:

a) Name (title): ………

b) Designation: ……….

c) Telephone No: ……………………. Fax No: …………………… E-mail: ……………………………………………………………

7. Details of programmes or qualifications (information for additional programmes to be supplied on a separate sheet)

a) Name of programme or qualification: ……………………………………………………………………

b) Fields of specialization: …………………………………………………………………………………

c) Year of commencement of the programme and accreditation status ………………………………..:
   ………

d) Modes of delivery[*please mark [X] where appropriate*]:

   ☐ Full-time (Research or Taught) ☐ Full-time Distance learning:

   ☐ Part-time (Research or Taught) ☐ Part-time Distance learning:

☐ Others: ……………………………………….

e) Duration of study:

Full Time: ……………………………………………………………………………………………

Part Time: …………………………………………………………………………………………

f) Methods of delivery (e.g.: lecture, tutorial, e-learning)

………
………
………

g) Methods of programme implementation (*please tick* [**X**] *where appropriate*):

☐ own programme
☐ in collaboration with other institutions (Please attached MoU and evidence of accreditation)
☐ others (specify)

………
………
………

Application fee: K……………………………………..

Enclosed herewith a Cheque (No: ……………………..) made payable to the National Council for Higher Education being payment for the application fee for accreditation.

8. Enclosed:

Copy of a letter authorizing establishment of the institution or previous accreditation

………………………………………………
9. Signature and name of the officer

Date: ………………………………………………….

Official stamp of the institution

For NCHE use only:

(please mark [X] where appropriate)

❑ Application fee enclosed (Cheque or deposit slip)
❑ A copy of the letter authorizing establishment of institution enclosed.

Name of receiving officer: …………………………………..

Signature: …………………………………………………………

Date: …………………………………………………………………