Building Resilience for Harmonisation of Educational Assessment: A Collaborative Approach

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Photo by Stefan Els

OVERVIEW

- Introduction
- Conceptualising quality assurance in assessment
- Case in point: SU-UIC & IEB-ISC
- Findings
- Lessons & Key takeaways

INTRODUCTION

Aim of the Paper

This paper aims to examine how resilience principles can support the harmonisation of educational standards in high stakes examinations using an instrumental case study
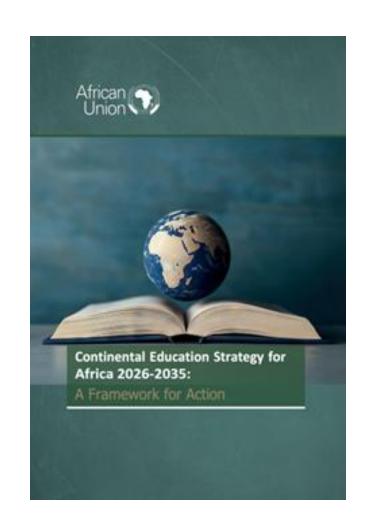
Questions:

- How can principles of resilience be applied to support the harmonisation of educational assessment standards in high-stakes examinations?

- In what ways does the collaboration between Stellenbosch University Unit for International Credentialling and the Independent Examination Board contribute to strengthening quality assurance and educational standards?

- How does the Resilient Quality Assurance for Transformation and Sustainability Framework facilitate alignment and sustainability in the external quality assurance of the International Secondary Certificate?

- What lessons can be learned from the implementation of resilience principles in the development and ongoing quality assurance of Africa's first international school-leaving qualification?

Harmonisation of educational standards

What Africa needs

- Continental Education Strategy for Africa

- Continental Assessment Framework for Africa

- Portability of qualifications

- Qualifications that are internationally comparable, regionally impactful, locally relevant

- Ideals and vision contrasting with realities of quality, policy and regulatory vacuum
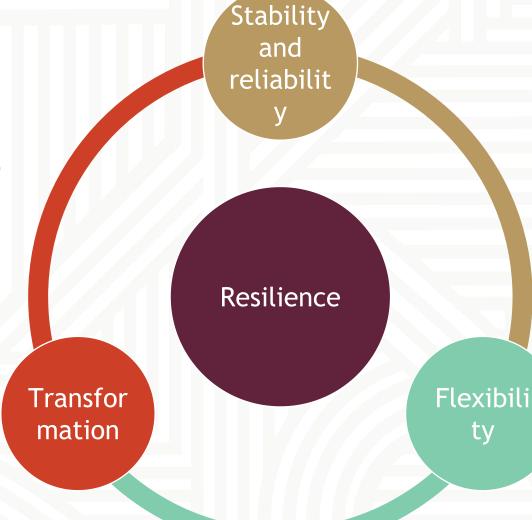
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience and flexibility for quality assurance

Resilience is the capacity to navigate uncertainty, shocks and change in order to contribute to sustaining or improving social-ecological outcomes

Stability and reliability

Resilience

Transformation

Flexibility

Adapted from Bene et al 2014, Jeans 2017

IEB International

Resilience and flexibility for quality assurance

Seven Principles for building resilience in social-ecological systems

Maintain diversity and redundancy

Manage slow variables and feedbacks

Encourage learning and experimentation

Promote polycentric governance system

Manage connectivity

Foster an understanding of complex adaptive systems

Broaden participation

Biggs et al. 2012, 2015
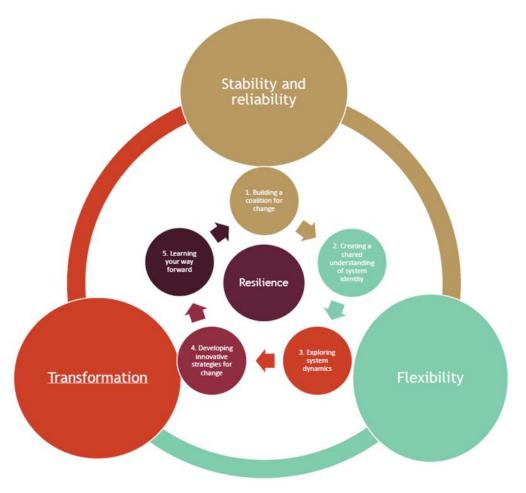
Reframing external quality assurance

The Resilient Quality Assurance Framework for Transformation, Flexibility and Sustainability in Assessment

Aim is to harmonise educational assessment standards in order to support portability of qualifications and increased access to HE and mobility of students within and beyond Africa

Stellenbosch University Unit for International Credentialling

Howie, 2025 adapted from Howie et al, 2024, Biggs et al, 2015, Wayfinder

CASE IN POINT: SU-UIC & IEB

Case context: SU-UIC & IEB-ISC

Origins:

- Africa's first international school-leaving qualification.

External Quality Assurance Role of SU-UIC:

- Development of an external quality assurance handbook.

- Moderation processes to ensure fairness, validity, and comparability.

Timeline & Milestones:

- 2021: First Ecctis review.

- 2022: First examinations

- 2023: Second Ecctis review after updated QA processes and stakeholder engagement.
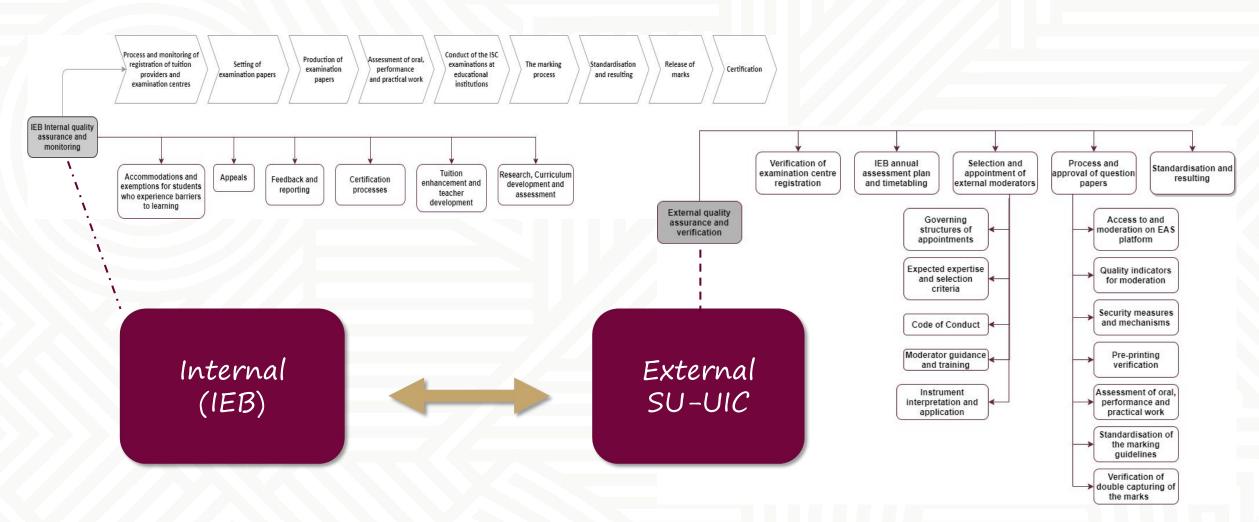
FINDINGS

QUESTIONS

- In what ways does the collaboration between Stellenbosch University Unit for International Credentialling and the Independent Examination Board contribute to strengthening quality assurance and educational standards?

- How does the Resilient Quality Assurance for Transformation and Sustainability Framework facilitate alignment and sustainability in the external quality assurance of the International Secondary Certificate?

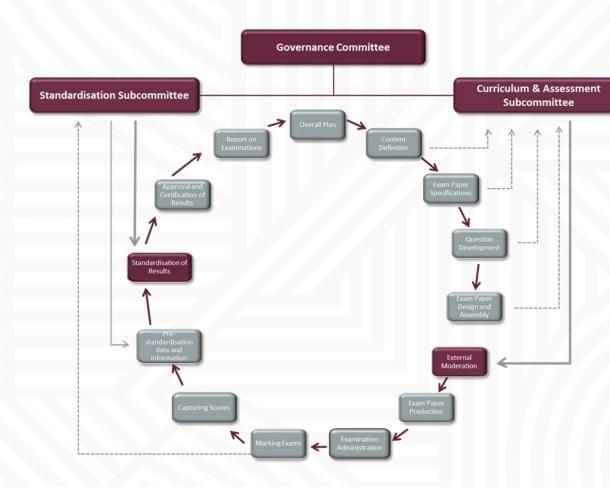# Overview of alignment between Internal and external quality assurance

External quality assurance: promoting polycentric governance system

Governance structure and supporting sub-committees

SU-UIC Quality Assurance Handbook, 2022

Findings

How the SU-UIC × IEB collaborative model strengthens QA and standards

Independent comparability: Ecctis benchmarking and follow-up QA inform recognition.

Platformised moderation/Exam Authoring Tool: secure, version-controlled workspace; shared instrument; auditable collaboration log.

Design & marking rigour: coverage, cognitive demand, language load, bias; pre-marking alignment.

Evidence-led standardisation: joint deliberation; dataset verification; disciplined release approvals.

Dual assurance, clear roles: IEB internal QA; SU-UIC independent external QA.

Professional learning loop: logged decisions, examiner/moderator reports, teacher feedback → targeted PD.

What we changed to design for an international qualification

Standards Architecture Formalised:

Shift from assessment-only to **curriculum-and-assessment** authority. CAMs and the Assessment Addendum set examinable content and cognitive demand; **design grids** and **tables of specifications** guide paper setting and moderation with staged sign-off (examiner → internal → external → IEB).

Diagnostic Submission Mark (DSM):

School-submitted subject mark used for QA alignment and support; **not** used for promotion.

Centre Recognition Regime:

Clear entry obligations for international independent schools offering the ISC—governance, security and full participation in IEB QA processes.

Standardisation Norms & Release Controls:

IEB defined statistical guardrails; SU-UIC's Standardisation Sub-committee leads subject standardisation; datasets are verified before approval, release, and certification.
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IEB processes & take-aways from alignment/collaboration

- **A quality assurance partnership — not quality control.**

- **Partnership ethos:** SU-UIC acts as a critical friend — focused on improvement, comparability and fairness.

- **Moderation as dialogue:** Examiner → IEB moderator → SU-UIC; issues are debated and resolved transparently; only unresolved risks escalate.

- **No punitive "initial moderation" report;** records capture the rationale, agreed remedies and follow-ups, feeding the next cycle.

SU-UIC Report:
Quality assurance of the IEB ISC examinations for 2024

- **Chapter 5: Process and approval of question papers:** A maximum of three moderation sessions is encouraged to finalise an examination paper, with dispute resolution mechanisms in place if consensus is not reached. This structured and systematic approach ensures that all examination papers meet the required quality assurance standards, maintaining the integrity of the assessment process.

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- **Conclusion:** SU-UIC remains committed to supporting the IEB in implementing these recommendations to ensure continuous improvement and the maintenance of high-quality assessment practices. With these efforts, the ISC examinations are poised for continued growth and recognition as a leading qualification in international education.

OPPORTUNITIES

Contextualised African Design:
Curriculum and assessments aligned to African contexts while meeting rigorous international standards. Committing to an Africa that is not only rising but leading as articulated by Prof Birhanu Nega, Minister of Education Ethiopia, in his conference opening remark

Dual Access:
Qualification design that supports local progression and global admissions (underpinned by external QA and international benchmarking).

Policy Leadership: A replicable assurance model for home-grown international qualifications on the continent.

Harmonisation/Integration:
Support the ideals of the Continental Assessment Framework in Africa: cohesion, access, portability etc.

CHALLENGES

Legislative Lacuna:
No domestic category yet for SA-origin international qualifications.

Policy vacuum
Requires alternative access measures for access to higher education to be enacted
More dalogue re local recognition, in collaboration with regulatory bodies Qualifications Authorities in all countries where the qualification is offered for recognition and accreditation

LESSONS & KEY TAKEAWAYS

What lessons can be learned from the implementation of resilience principles in the development and ongoing quality assurance of Africa's first international school-leaving qualification?

01 — **Build while delivering** — through an assurance partnership.

02 — **Assurance/Enhancement over control:** SU-UIC and the IEB act as co-responsible quality assurers; moderation is an evidence-led dialogue, with escalation reserved for material risk.

03 — **Adaptive governance in a legislative lacuna:** Deliver under interim enablement while the permanent instrument is finalised; tighten every cycle — design → moderation → marking → standardisation → release.

Thank you
Enkosi
Dankie

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