

Paper proposal

Conference sub-theme

Different approaches to QA and their impact on efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability

Topic

The need to re-work the quality assurance dynamics – Using Nigeria and South Africa as case studies

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Audio-visual requirements

Laptop and multimedia projector

Abstract

This paper explores quality assurance in Nigeria and South Africa higher Institutions. It examines the multi-dimensional concept of quality assurance as embracing the functions and activities relating to internal self-evaluation and external review that are vital for enhancing quality.

Although this paper inquires into the application of quality assurance mechanisms to the growing concerns facing both national and transnational education, discussion would be centred on contentions regarding quality assurance such as fixation on:

- *processes rather than purposes*
- *compliance rather quality culture*
- *accreditation rather than institutional autonomy and freedom*

It would assess whether diffusion of practices from the West would be enhancing. Suggestions would be on the need to improve quality assurance to make it more fit for purpose and responsive to global challenges.

Nigeria – Africa's most populous country with about 140,000 million people, rich in oil and gas deposits is still largely impoverished. For despite its large oil revenues, there is still a large degree of poverty. While one third of its population are extremely rich, the other two-thirds are struggling to survive on less than one dollar a day (WORLD BANK 1996). Educational development, particularly higher education, which is expected to drive social and economic growth is still quite marginal and undermined by low levels of investments and access to education as well as long standing problems of good governance, financial management and quality assurance processes. Higher education in Nigeria enrolls a very low number of population. Only about 4% of the relevant age group are enrolled in universities and this compares poorly with other countries such as South Africa where 17% are enrolled (TASK FORCE 2000).

Nigeria like its counterpart South Africa is experiencing rapid growth in enrollments and is becoming conscious of the need for effective quality assurance and quality improvement (Asmel 2003; Okebukola 2006). In both countries there is the need to reassure the public about the quality of private providers, and the importance of ensuring that tertiary education offered in both public and private tertiary institutions meets acceptable local and international standards. Nigeria however is often considered to be less liberal when it comes to transnational education because of the huge problem it is facing accrediting its own national institutions. In the regulatory framework developed for foreign providers by the Observatory on Borderless Higher

Education, Nigeria was grouped as a country with no regulation whilst its counterpart South Africa was considered as having very restrictive regulations for foreign providers.

It is yet to be verified if Nigeria can be said to have no regulation although this framework reveals the perception foreigners have of the Nigerian market while there seems to exist an undercover of foreign educators thriving in the country.

The history of tertiary education in Africa reveals traces of transnational education and quality assurance mechanism but recently there has been a lot of variance in mode and media prompted by growing social demand and changes in the knowledge economy and trade liberalization. The challenge could be the absence of an effective QA system for transnational education thus making it difficult for students to have a reliable basis for choosing between different borderless offers and governments, on the other hand, do not have a mechanism for holding these providers accountable for the quality of their programs. This problem is most evident in Nigeria where there are no statistical data on the number of transnational providers and scant information on them is acquired through advertisements in the print and broadcast media and often times a caveat issued by the regulatory agency which is either unseen or ignored by members of public.

Accreditation of national institutions in both countries is mandatory and more often than not focuses on regulation rather than to enhance accountability and quality improvement. There is also not enough emphasis on the importance of relating quality assurance processes with funding allocations, impact of graduate employability and performance as a way of promoting accountability.

In both Nigeria and South Africa, there is a convergence in the way quality assurance is carried out. The approach followed is similar to approach in developed countries which involves a programme self assessment followed by peer review and report of findings to the institution, government and stakeholders. A lot of attention is paid to input such as resources, number and qualification of staff, entry qualifications, academic programme etc. One can say that a good job is done at examining instructional resources, academic staffing, pedagogy and learning outcomes but quality assurance agencies seem less well equipped to examine the stewardship of federal funds and to check students complaints.

Although quality assurance agencies enjoy significant autonomy in their operations, they are highly dependent on government and this raises concerns about the legitimacy of requests by these agencies that institutions comply with quality improvement requirements unless this is accompanied by adequate government funding to address the problems identified. Development of quality standards and verification of compliance for transnational education require new skills which are currently lacking.

There is a need to rework the quality assurance dynamics to ensure that responsibility for quality of higher education rests with the higher education institutions. Capacity building efforts should be directed to building a culture of quality within HEIs. Without a strong culture of quality in institutions of higher learning, there is little chance of success at achieving the right impact of quality assurance. Partnership with foreign institutions and QA agencies with sound QA experience can help to supplement local capacity in the short-term and also bring in relevant

experience from other regions. There is a need to step up the quality of cooperation and importance of dialogue in quality assurance among countries.

Reworking the quality assurance dynamics would involve giving some attention to approaches which have enough strength to command their consideration and weaknesses to discourage them. Self study is an area of strength but its practice in Africa needs to be bolstered so that it involves a comprehensive examination of an institution or programme by its own members, presented to peers for third party validation and amplification. For the integrity of self-study to be persevered, it might help to physically separate the external verification and inspection component of accreditation for the self study because when the two are combined the compliance principle tends to dominate. If self study is for the internal consumption of an institution then there would be no incentive to conceal or falsify, as incorrect information would mean an institution fooling itself and that would be a self-defeatist approach.

Secondly, the less government interferes, the higher the chances of having self-regulated institutions. Government's role can then be restricted to tying accreditation to provision of funds and monitoring fiscal compliance. Relying on private quality assurance agencies would then ensure that the quality assurance agencies act as a buffer against politicization or undue meddling of government in academic affairs.

Third, peer reviewers are practicing academics and professional with years of experience in their own roles and fields and are therefore in a position to examine and disseminate good practice. Peer reviewers could be used to protect the autonomy of the academy when peer reviewers assume collective responsibility to assure and improve quality rather than just pointing what is

wrong. Because peer reviewers knowledge may be confined to field alone, it is important to provide team training.

Fourth, regulatory process are supposed to be applied uniformly and so there is no reason why the private sector should to be singled out and subjected to a more stringent set of criteria as this raises questions of differential treatment of institutions.

To avoid focusing on counting minimum standards rather than being inspirational, processes and outcomes need to be examined in a balanced way by looking at how they interact so that they lean towards learning outcome and institutional performance rather than the minimum standards of performance that is frequently applied. Institutions should be able to use the quality assurance process as a means to address problems that are of genuine interest and importance. A strong focus needs to be placed on achieving quality through constructive criticism and consultation rather than compliance. Screening process needs to be used to determine that institutions or programmes have sufficient capacity for academic quality and should not primarily be used as a tool for exclusion. It should inspire considerable work on the part of the institution and investment of resources so that the institutions who pass the primary test can join the league of accredited institutions.

Quality assurance is a process that needs to evolve continuously in order for it to remain fit for purpose. It is important that countries draw strengths from countries who have longer history of quality assurance while failures of such historical countries become a learning point. Five years after its establishment, quality assurance in the UK was regarded as a failed experiment -

expensive, damaging to efficiency, and probably ineffective (THES editorial, 2001; Baty, 2001). Even recently there have been accusations of quality assurance burying itself ‘in process and box-ticking’ rather than engaging in the monitoring of outcome or in thinking about policy (Kealey, 2008). Yet are some important practices such as self-regulation, peer review issuing from the UK quality assurance system that can be emulated.

The United States’ accreditation system once proclaimed the best in the world has had its accreditation tried in several public tribunals and found wanting. This is evident in the numerous reports and calls to action from business and public policy entities that have challenged accreditation to do more about transparency of accreditation practices and reports; more about measuring and then publicizing student learning outcomes and the list goes on (Dickenson 2009)

One can never get it 100% right but a good start is to re-work the quality assurance dynamics by responding to legitimate institutional and public concerns.

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