

The role of quality assurance in building and maintaining a culture of excellence in higher education: The African perspective

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Introduction

The need for quality assurance (QA) for organizational effectiveness and excellence beyond prior standards has become a global imperative. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are responding to this demand by strategically initiating the incorporation of quality measures into systems and structures in their institutions. QA is now featured in the strategic plans of higher institutions in their quest for improvement, quality control and higher performance aimed at building and maintaining a strong culture of excellence. This is needed for fitness for purpose (Mizikaci, 2006), stakeholder satisfaction, continuous improvement and brand identity. This paper explores the historical backgrounds, philosophical underpinning and current approaches in QA measures to create and maintain a strong institutional culture of excellence. The paper provides a perspective of the attempts by Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana, to build a culture of excellence using the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach. The paper further shares the continental efforts in Africa to assist in the development of capacity in institutions in Africa and to strengthen their quality control measures. The paper concludes with recommendations for building a culture of excellence.

The concept of higher education

In order to appreciate the organizational type in focus, it is imperative to appreciate the concept of higher education institutions. Though the term

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may be broadly used to include professional organizations, agencies and foundations focused on research, policies and other operations of colleges and universities, the literature varies when it comes to defining what really constitutes higher education institutions (HEIs).

Generally, HEIs may refer to formalized educational institutions with a strong academic post-high school orientation or similar. Several professional institutions require at least high school-equivalent credentials, but their orientations are less academic. Again, HEIs are distinct from adult/continuing education, which often tends to be concerned with basic life skills and civic education among other things.

The concept would also have a different meaning in different places and at different times. An institution considered to be an HEI in one country may not be labelled as such in another country. Over time an institution that was previously not regarded as an HEI could assume a new status. For instance, in Ghana, colleges of education previously known as training colleges, which require high school credentials for admission, are now classified as HEIs. For the purposes of this paper, HEI refers to colleges and universities as earlier specified.

The concept of quality assurance in higher education

Perhaps the difficulty in satisfactorily defining quality control in higher education is due to the fact that the concept originated from the manufacturing industry. According to Harvey and Green (1993), different meanings are assigned to quality as a result of the complex nature of the stakeholders in higher education. Quality assurance has different interpretations from the user's perspective (students, teaching, administrative and various other professional staff members, quality control agencies, etc.), so creating a culture of quality in higher education institutions means agreeing on a common definition of the quality concept. The issue of academic freedom in higher education has also affected the acceptance of quality assurance measures. Kinser (2011) indicates that QA is a relatively new concept in higher education, even though systems of quality assurance can be traced back more than a century in the United States and the United Kingdom. He further states that few other countries developed their own systems before the mid-1980s. Historically, HEIs have tended to regulate themselves and such a great degree of autonomy has sometimes prevented them from embracing change through quality assurance mechanisms. The above notwithstanding, several institutions are incorporating QA systems and policies in their system of operations.

Vught and Westerheijden (1994) observed that quality assessment in higher education dates back to the medieval era. The authors identified two major models of quality assessment that had been in use prior to the introduction of modern systems. The first was the French model of vesting control in external authority, the second was the English model of self-governing a community of fellows. The French model, they observed, was characterized by the struggle for self-autonomy by the University of Paris in the early thirteenth century. The English model of self-governance took inspiration from the masters at the medieval universities of Oxford and Cambridge, who were independent of external control. These major models are still in use but in modified forms. They are termed external and internal quality assurance according to the source of control. External measures are all the requirements demanded by the accreditation/governmental agency from an institution, often backed by law. According to Harvey (2005), external quality assurance is not necessarily government controlled – though it tends to be established in response to a public policy demand – but it ensures the need for greater accountability. Internal quality assurance will include all of the measures an institution puts in place to ensure quality.

Institutional approach to QA

National bodies are set up to regulate higher education in most countries. They set up rules and benchmarks/standards to which each institution should adhere. According to Oyewole (2012), the enforcement of QA standards are in response to the demand for:

- efficiency and competitiveness
- increased mobility, globalization and cross-border recognition of qualifications
- the involvement of private interest in higher education
- the challenge of mode of delivery
- an expansion in enrolment
- market demands for quality and relevance of education
- the challenge of brain drain.

Based on these and other factors, institutions set up quality assurance/control units/departments to coordinate all quality matters.

The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, for example, has established the Quality Assurance and Planning Unit (QAPU). QAPU is responsible for strategic planning and overseeing quality assurance, as well as the management of the university's information systems. The unit uses a three-stage approach, made up of inputs, process

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and output, to ensure quality. The inputs stage involves all of the activities conducted to admit/recruit students and staff. Measures are in place to ensure that only qualified students are admitted and qualified staffs are recruited. The next stage involves all of the internal and external processes to ensure that there is customer satisfaction, value for money and continuous professional improvement. These are applied to the following areas: teaching and learning, students' affairs, quality research, community outreach, governance structures, resource utilization, internationalization, regulations/accreditations and academic freedom. The output stage involves evaluation to see if the desired outcomes are obtained. These include: examination audit, graduation rate, satisfaction survey, tracer studies for curriculum improvement and exit interviews, among others.

Policies and guidelines have been developed as well as regular periodic training. This is offered through a summer school arrangement, with all members of staff being instructed on the planned agenda before the beginning of the academic year. Continuous training programmes use the TQM principle, ensuring that KNUST remains committed to constant improvement in order to fulfil a new philosophy of zero errors/defects. The culture of quality is emphasized, which has led to the establishment of a quality assurance subunit in every operational area of the university.

QA initiatives in HEIs in Africa

The focus of quality assurance measures in Africa has mainly been on accreditation and academic evaluation. Accreditation is concerned with institutions meeting standards set by governments, national agencies or professional bodies. In Ghana, for example, there is institutional accreditation whereby the institution is accredited to function as such by the National Accreditation Board (NAB). There is also programme accreditation, where each programme of an institution goes through periodic accreditation/reaccreditation. Academic evaluation/assessment/audit, on the other hand, is undertaken by governments or national agencies to assess the HEIs' academic processes to ensure quality of teaching and learning. The audit involves preparing an institutional self-assessment report, which is reviewed by a panel of external assessors who undertake a site visit and submit their report. The objective of the academic evaluation is for development and enhancement, but in some countries it is linked to accountability and public funding. The evaluation process is now widely used internationally. Both accreditation and evaluation processes are important for improving quality in African HEIs.

Most HEIs in African countries have had collaborations with European institutions, which implies that the Bologna Process was adopted by those African institutions with regards to QA. However, by the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, several HEIs in Africa, such as the University of Mauritius, St Mary's University College, Ethiopia, and the University of Dar es Salaam, introduced QA at institutional level through further collaboration with European universities, before the introduction of national QA processes. The South African Council for Higher Education was the first to introduce national QA processes through its HEQC in 2000. In 2005, the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) embarked on a process to promote QA systems in public and private HEIs in East African countries with support from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD; Woldetensae, 2012). According to Sall (2012), the Council for Higher Education in Africa and Madagascar (CAMES) is the management body for external quality assurance for all 17 member states, which ensures that there is acceptance of qualifications and maintenance of common standards. There are other subregional groupings, for instance, Anglophone West Africa, Portuguese-Speaking, and the Arab-African and North Africa. All of these subregional bodies were set up to ensure the development and implementation of QA systems in their member institutions. The Association of African Universities facilitated the establishment of AfriQAN in 2007 with support from the World Bank Development Grant Facility. AfriQAN serves as a regional body, mainly for the capacity building of national QA agencies.

The African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) was developed by the African Union Commission as part of the African Union's strategy for harmonizing higher education, and was adopted by the Conference of Ministers of Education of Africa (COMEDAF) in 2007. The objectives of AQRM were as follows: to revitalize and strengthen African HEIs so as to be globally competitive and locally relevant; to be used as a tool for benchmarking quality in HE; and to encourage HEIs to undertake self-evaluation and develop an institutional culture of quality. The aim is to have African HEIs set the standards for their institutions and to have these standards reviewed by experts through a self-assessment process.

Building a culture of excellence for QA

According to EUA (2003), cited in Gvaramadze (2008), the concept of quality culture describes 'shared values and collective responsibility of all members of higher education institutions'. In the EUA perspective, quality culture is an internal organizational culture with permanent enhancement

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mechanisms at two distinct levels. These are at the institutional level, which refers to all administrative and managerial strategies put in place in order to enhance the quality and coordination of members; this is also termed quality as an enhancement process. The other distinct level is at the individual/staff level, and refers to the cultural and psychological aspects of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality culture among individuals; this is also termed quality as a transformation process.

Building a strong culture depends on measures identified by each individual institution, often expressed in its vision and mission statements. This often indicates the direction in which the institution intends to go and the strategy it means to use to achieve that goal. Based on this direction, internal quality measures are designed to guide the attainment of such goals. According to Gvaramadze (2008), the basic principles guiding internal quality assurance strategies are:

- responsibility of HEIs for internal quality assurance
- encouragement of internal quality culture, diversity and innovation
- efficient organizational structures
- transparency
- accountability for public and private funding
- inclusion of general social and individual learners' interests in the quality of higher education.

The attainment of effective culture will also depend on efficient systems being put in place. There should be adequate tools and effective teams. All of the other processes should be actively communicated to all stakeholders. Commitment by all stakeholders is necessary, especially from top management. Arafeh (2012) observed that ensuring the necessary quality culture requires working at institutional, national and regional levels. He postulates that solid interaction and partnership with other actors, and accountability and transparency with regards to all related stakeholders, are important to achieve a strong culture.

Recommendations

Institutions of higher learning must appreciate that for an effective culture to be built, all stakeholders must understand and appreciate the vision and mission of their institution.

Again, it is important that the appropriate policies and guidelines are developed and communicated to all stakeholders. This will help guide them as to the direction in which the institution is heading.

Feedback from major stakeholders must be used for continuous improvement. Their feedback by way of satisfaction surveys, exit interviews and tracer studies must be incorporated in initiating and formulating new plans.

Also, to ensure effectiveness of the QA system, modern methods of supervision, monitoring and evaluation should be implemented. This is to ensure the elimination of barriers to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness.

Above all, a systematic approach should be developed to manage the implementation of TQM. There should be commitment from top management, and TQM must apply to all areas of the institution's operations.

Conclusion

In response to the increasing need for quality control, higher education institutions in Africa, just like in other parts of the world, have risen to the challenge by establishing appropriate measures and standards to ensure consistently effective and excellent performance. These quality assurance measures are, essentially, new versions of two main types, which are based on institutions being predominantly self-governing or regulated by external authority. The objectives for implementing quality assurance are manifold. KNUST in Ghana, for instance, has adopted the TQM approach in implementing quality assurance measures to ensure that operational inputs, processes and outputs are optimal. Efforts are being made by various regional bodies on the continent of Africa to create awareness and to develop and strengthen the capacity of institutions to implement quality assurance programmes. Policymakers must appreciate the changing trends in higher education and constantly share ideas to build and maintain a strong culture of excellence using quality assurance.

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