

Concept Paper

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Concept Paper

Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Its Implications on Higher Education Institutions and Challenges in Zambia

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Abstract: This paper discussed the concept of quality assurance (QA) in higher education and its implications to higher education institutions (HEIs) and the possible challenges. The study evaluated literature concerning QA in Zambia and elsewhere. The findings of the study show that QA is implemented through external and internal mechanisms such as accreditation, registration, institutional auditing, and the use of external examiners, self-evaluation, and peer reviews. The QA implications to HEIs in Zambia are that there is a need for accreditation of academic programmes with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) by HEIs. Further, HEIs should establish QA units to spearhead quality issues, reactive, and introduce the use of external examiners to ensure quality. The challenges identified in the implementation of QA in HEIs include inadequate funding, infrastructure, shortage of qualified academic staff, and lack of standalone QA units in some HEIs. In this regard, it has been recommended among other things, government improve funding in public HEIs, construct infrastructure, HEIs establish QA units, and recruit and retain qualified academic staff to ensure the quality of education.

Keywords: quality assurance in higher education in Zambia; higher education and quality assurance; Zambia's higher education

1. Introduction

Production of goods and services to satisfy the needs of the end-users cannot be achieved without placing a premium on quality assurance (QA). The concept of quality assurance has its root in the manufacturing sector. It can be traced back to the post-scientific management movement pioneered by Frederick Taylor in the 1920s which resulted in improved production at the expense of quality. The scientific management philosophy of Taylor separated the concept of quality assurance and quality control from the workers. In this regard, separate departments in factories were created to check or inspect the produced goods if they met the expected standards (Juran, 1973). As a result, scientists such as W. Edwards Deming in the 1950s began to look for answers on how to improve the quality of the products. Several experiments were conducted and gave rise to the concept of total quality management with emphasis on continuously improving the quality of products and ensuring that quality management became the responsibility of every employee in an organisation, not only the quality control department.

The education sector though not a manufacturing sector, but a service sector has adopted the concept of quality management in the form of quality assurance (QA). Quality assurance is being preached in higher education to ensure that the quality of education being provided meets the set standards and that the graduates who are the products of the education production systems meet the labour market demands. Given this scenario, higher education institutions are mandated to provide higher education following national and regional quality assurance standards and frameworks. To ensure QA and compliance, many governments have established statutory bodies to oversee the quality of higher education. In Zambia, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) have been established by the Acts of Parliament, namely the Higher

Education Act No. 4 of 2013 and Zambia Qualification Act of 2011 (the Republic of Zambia, 2013; the Republic of Zambia, 2011). Further, for the Government of Zambia to operationalise the concept of QA, the higher education act of 2013 compels all higher education institutions (HEIs) especially universities to establish quality assurance departments and directorates.

This paper, therefore, sought to discuss the concept of QA, its implications on HEIs, and the possible challenges of QA in Zambia. To start with, the paper defines the concepts of quality and quality assurance; explains the importance of QA and approaches to QA in higher education. Thereafter, it discusses QA implications on HEIs and challenges in Zambia and draws up a conclusion and recommendations on this subject.

1.1. Definition of Concepts

The term quality has been defined in several ways. According to ISO (2015), quality is the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfill requirements (ISO, 2015). Quality refers to the set of inherent properties of an object that allows satisfying stated or implied needs (Geneva Business News, 2014). Requirements could be in form of needs or expectations that are stated, generally implied, or obligatory. In this regard, it can be argued that any product needs to meet expectations, set standards, and more importantly, meet a need. A product can be said to be of good quality if it complies with the requirements specified in the industry and meets the needs of a client.

The concept of quality assurance (QA) can be defined as part of quality management focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled (ISO, 2015). Quality assurance is all the planned and systematic activities implemented within the quality system that can be demonstrated to provide confidence that a product or service will fulfill requirements for quality (American Society for Quality, 2022). Quality assurance in higher education is a process of establishing stakeholders' confidence that provision (inputs, processes, outcomes) fulfills expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2017). It is linked to assessment (refereeing to all methods used to judge the performance of an individual, group, or organization) and to accreditation (the establishment of the status, legitimacy, and appropriateness of higher education institutions or programme).

The confidence provided by QA lead to both internal and external stakeholders of an organisation is satisfied. Internal stakeholders include management while external stakeholders are customers, government agencies, regulators, certifiers, and third parties.

It is cardinal to mention that QA is broader than quality control (QC) as QA is concerned with ensuring quality adherence to set standards and requirements in the processes associated with the production of goods and services. It ensures that quality aspects of products and services are observed at all levels of production. Quality control is concerned with verifying whether or not the produced goods and services conform to the prescribed standards; it is the quality inspection that is carried out by testing the products against the set standards (American Society for Quality, 2022). However, QA is narrow in scope compared to the concept of quality management (QM). Quality management is broader as it includes the establishment of quality policies, quality objectives, and processes to achieve quality objectives through quality planning, QA, QC, and quality improvement (ISO, 2015).

1.2. Importance of quality assurance in education

Quality assurance has become important in higher education because of several reasons. These include:

1.2.1. Improvement teaching and research and regulation of higher education

One of the principal objectives of QA is to improve teaching and research in higher education institutions (European Commission, 2022). The core business of any HEIs such as universities is teaching and research. The quality of teaching and research output can only improve if there is QA. Instead of relying on the one-off certificate, confirming that the quality standards have been met, QA

process serves as a more forward-thinking cycle for continuous improvement (Matei & Iwinska, 2016).

1.2.2. Regulation of higher education sector

Quality assurance is a self-regulation mechanism in higher education that ensures that education providers provide services that meet set standards. It has been observed that there is a surge in demand for higher education and more players have become providing higher education. By 2021, the World Bank estimated over 200 million students were pursuing tertiary education and it attributed this increase to the perceived benefits of attaining higher education (The World Bank, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that there is a 21% increase in earnings among tertiary education graduates. In this regard, many public and private institutions in Zambia and other countries are providing higher education with different standards. To ensure quality and that the level of education provided meets acceptable standards by stakeholders, QA has to be implemented.

1.2.3. Accountability and transparency in higher education

Further, there is an increased call for transparency and accountability in both private and public HEIs. They are calls to subject HEIs to scrutiny by internal and external stakeholders to ensure that the education being provided meets the minimum local, regional, and internal standards (The World Bank, 2007).

1.2.4. Increased competition in higher education

As indicated in 1.2.2, many institutions are providing higher education. There is cut-throat competition among education providers. These providers are competing to attract students to study with them. For them to successfully attract the best and more students, quality assurance has to be embraced and practiced to provide educational services of excellent quality which will attract more learners.

1.2.5. Reputation building and status maintenance

A higher learning institutions' name, status, and reputation are key in higher education. Prestigious universities have a name and status that make them attract the best and more students in the world. For them to build and maintain the name, there is a need to continuously preach QA.

Another importance of QA is that it enables stakeholders such as students and parents to know the standards, and status of a higher education institution (HEI) because information on the quality of education it provides is made public. Further, QA makes it possible to harmonise academic programmes at national, regional, and global levels (Matei & Iwinska, 2016).

1.3. *Approaches to Quality Assurance in Higher Education*

Quality assurance mechanisms are both internal and external in nature. Internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to the institution's mechanisms to ensure and improve its quality while external quality assurance (EQA) involves the monitoring of the quality of an HEI by an external quality assurance agency such as a national commission/council for higher education or higher education authority (DAAD, 2018). The quality of education in HEIs is assessed by an external agency at two levels; namely institutional and programme levels. At the institutional level, the focus is on the mission, governance, effective management, academic programmes, teaching staff, learning resources, students and related services, physical facilities, and financial resources of a higher education institution. And the programmatic level, external quality assurance looks at individual programmes as the unit of analysis (DAAD, 2018).

1.3.1. Internal quality assurance mechanisms

All higher education institutions are compelled by national education laws to establish internal quality management systems for assuring quality in teaching, research, and organisation (European Commission, 2022). Based on this, the HEIs choose those approaches and arrangements that best suit their own needs. There is a call for continuous internal evaluations of the performance of HEI in terms of the performance of staff in the areas of teaching and research. To facilitate this process, HEIs are expected to establish QA units and committees that coordinate issues of QA in an HEI. Duties of QA units or committees include among other things, conducting reviews of the teaching, learning, and research in HEI; checking if they conform to set standards. Quality assurance units also seek feedback from education stakeholders such as students and parents (source). Other responsibilities of QA units include monitoring the quality of assessment judgments; ensuring consistent and reliable assessment judgments are made across a provider; highlighting any problems, trends and development needs of assessors; ensuring all procedures and policies within a provider are adhered to and maintained by staff (Educating UK, 2016). Other internal QA mechanisms involve raising awareness about QA and cultivating the culture of QA among lecturers through mechanisms such as self-assessments and peer reviews.

Other internal mechanisms of ensuring quality in higher learning institutions include the use of external examiners. The use of external examiners has been a long-standing practice in Africa and Zambia in particular (DAAD, 2018). For example, a professor within a region of Southern Africa Development Cooperation (SADC) could be invited by the University of Zambia (UNZA) to review the marked examination scripts and programmes offered in the inviting department of a university. At the end of the external examiner's work, a report is submitted to the department and university to improve quality.

1.3.2. External Quality assurance mechanisms

The first important method of quality assurance under the external approach is accreditation. This is an evaluation of whether an institution or programme/s meets a threshold standard and qualifies for a certain status (Kis, 2005). Under accreditation, programmes of a higher education institution are accredited to national, regional, and global quality assurance agencies. In Zambia, all universities must accredit their programmes with the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Failure to do, an HEI will not be allowed to operate. Private HEIs in Zambia are required also to register with HEA before seeking accreditation of their programmes. To ensure the quality of education at both regional and continental levels, the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) have been established (DAAD, 2018). Currently, the HEA is affiliated with SAQAN.

Another external method of ensuring quality is assessment. This mechanism focuses on making graded judgments about quality (going beyond the binary judgments of accreditation); it focuses on the quality of outputs (DAAD, 2018). The output of an assessment is a quantitative evaluation, a grade (whether numeric, literal, or descriptive). Programme assessment is used in many European countries.

In ensuring quality in higher education, an institutional audit is conducted which assesses the extent to which an HEI achieves its objectives; establishes whether or not the HEI's processes are effective. The output of an audit is usually a description of the extent to which the claims of the HEI are correct. The audit focuses on internal procedures adopted by an HEI to achieve its objectives. Quality audits help HEIs to identify their weaknesses and areas that need improvement. It also helps in creating a balance between anticipated and actual performance. (VJTF, 2020).

2. Quality Assurance Implications on Higher Education in Zambia

As indicated in the introduction, the government of the Republic of Zambia acknowledges the need to assure the quality of higher education being provided in Zambia. In this regard, statutory bodies such as Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA)

have been established to assure the quality of higher education training in the country. For quality to be assured in higher education in Zambia, both internal and external QA mechanisms have to adhere to by QA agencies and HEIs. These include:

2.1. Registration and accreditation of higher education institutions and their programmes

The higher education Act of 2013 in Zambia provides for all higher education institutions (HEIs) to register themselves with the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Further, HEIs have to accredit their programmes to HEA which in turn forward the programmes to Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) so that the qualifications can be verified and rated in line with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of Zambia. The HEIs that fail to meet the minimum set of standards are not registered and their programmes are not accredited. This has brought some sanity in the higher education sector as quack institutions are closed down. According to HEA as by December 2020, a total of 1,192 learning programmes were submitted to the HEA from nine public and 51 private for accreditation. From this number, 563 programmes were accredited and 210 were rejected and 419 programmes were still undergoing the evaluation process (Higher Education Authority, 2021).

2.2. Periodic auditing of higher education institutions

In a bid to continuously improve and assure the quality of higher education, the HEA is mandated by Law to conduct institutional audits of HEIs quality assurance systems (the Republic of Zambia, 2013). In this regard, institutional policies as regard quality, infrastructure, academic programmes, and, financial sustainability of HEIs among other things, are audited. This should not be done once during registration and accreditation but often to continuously assure the quality of education being provided. HEIs that fail to pass the audit should not be allowed to continue providing higher education as they will comprise the quality of education.

2.3. Establishment of quality assurance units and committees

To effectively implement internal quality assurance measures, HEIs in Zambia need to establish quality assurance (QA) units and committees to spearhead the issues of QA. The HEA which is empowered by the Higher Education Act of 2013 has to push for the establishment of QA units or directorates in HEIs in Zambia. Currently, public universities such as the University of Zambia (UNZA) and Copperbelt University (CBU) have established directorates to oversee the issues of QA. It is important to mention that these QA directorates currently have concentrated on fulfilling the mandate of accrediting academic programmes to HEA. They have neglected the implementation of internal QA measures. These QA units/directorates should raise awareness about QA and cultivate a culture of quality in teaching and learning in HEIs. This should be done by creating quality assurance committees in schools and faculties. Further, QA units should actively audit all the learning processes, facilities, academic programmes, staff, etc., and report accurately without fear if the quality of higher education in both public and private universities has to improve. Further, it should be the mandate of such units to develop QA policies and frameworks to assure the quality of education. It is also worth mentioning that many private universities are yet to established independent units for QA.

2.4. Revamping and embracing the concept of external examiners

As observed in 1.3.1, the use of external examiners has been an integral part of QA in universities and other higher education institutions. It has been a practice of appointing an external examiner for a period of 4 years and he/she should be qualified enough to add value as regard QA. For example, the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom (UK) appoints external examiners for faculties/schools for a period of 4 years. (University of Exeter, 2022). In Zambia, UNZA used to appoint external examiners for every department, and usually, these examiners came from other countries in the region. Unfortunately, this practice has been stopped because the university and

schools do not have money to host external examiners. To ensure QA, HEIs should continue with this practice and the newly established HEIs should embrace this concept as a mechanism to enhance QA.

3. Challenges of Implementing Quality Assurance in Zambia

Several challenges make it difficult for HEIs to fully implement QA as they provide higher education. Principal among them is inadequate financial resources. As observed by the World Bank, (2007), many universities especially public ones suffer from under-funding. For many years, Public HEIs have suffered from under-funding from the government in Zambia. This has made it possible to implement QA initiatives.

Another challenge to QA is a rapid increase in enrolments in HEIs in Zambia. For example, the number of students pursuing university education in public and private universities has increased from 91,969 in 2017 to 114,049 in 2020 (Republic of Zambia. Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). This is against limited infrastructure, especially in public universities. For example, the University of Zambia this year (2022) has over-enrolled in Medical Sciences; over 2000 students against a big lecture theatre at the school of medicines with a sitting capacity of 100 students. Inadequate infrastructure has further compromised the quality of higher education.

Inadequate infrastructure is also another challenge that lowers the quality of higher education. In public HEIs, this has been due to under-funding by the government. In many public universities, there is an acute shortage of infrastructures such as lecture theatres and students accommodation. The 2019 higher education policy acknowledged this and the government promised to deal with it (Republic of Zambia. Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). For example, the University of Zambia has an acute shortage of accommodation, offices, and lecture theatres. This has been a source of concern as it contributes to the lower quality of higher education.

Another challenge has to do with the technical and tedious process of accrediting academic programmes by the HEA. As Stander (2016) observed, South African Private Universities have difficulties accrediting their programmes to the Council of Higher Education (CHE) because the process is technical and complex (Stander, 2016). Higher education institutions in Zambia that wish to accredit their academic programmes face challenges in formatting the documents needed by HEA format. For example, UNZA is still formatting some academic programme documents to be submitted to HEA.

The lack of experienced and highly skilled academic staff in HEIs in Zambia is another challenge to QA. The World Bank (2007) observed that Sub-Saharan Africa HEIs face a problem of shortage of qualified staff due to brain drain. Much qualified academic staff in Zambia has gone to seek greener pastures in South Africa and other countries in the regions. This has also contributed to the poor quality of education in Zambia.

Furthermore, many learning institutions in Zambia have not internalised the concept of QA. This is evidenced by the lack of QA policies, procedures, and frameworks. Further, there is no financial commitment towards QA-related issues in the higher education sector.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be said that QA is about assuring stakeholders about the quality of higher education provided is in line with set national and international standards. It is about value for money for stakeholders. The study has established that QA is implemented through external and internal approaches such as accreditation, registration, institutional auditing, self-evaluation, and external examiners. The implications of QA for HEIs in Zambia are that: there is a need for HEIs to register themselves and accredit their programmes with the HEA. Further, there is a need for all HEIs to establish QA units to spearhead the issues of QA. It has also been established that there are many challenges in ensuring quality in HEIs in Zambia. These include poor funding among public HEIs, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified academic staff, rapid increase in enrolments, failure to embrace fully the issue of QA among some HEIs in Zambia.

Given the above findings, the following have recommended:

- (i) All HEIs should have their academic programmes accredited to Higher the HEA.
- (ii) The HEA should continuously conduct institutional audits in HEIs to ensure quality.
- (iii) Government should improve funding to public HEIs.
- (iv) Construction of infrastructure in public HEIs is needed to assure quality.
- (v) All HEIs should establish QA units to aid the implementation of QA measures.
- (vi) Attract qualified and experienced academic staff to ensure quality in teaching and research in HEIs.

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