

Implementation of quality Assurance Standards in Zimbabwean context of Higher Education: What are the challenges?

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Abstract: Higher and tertiary education is essential for economic and political development of a country and is vital to competitiveness in an increasing globalizing knowledge society. Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education is a wide subject and during the last decade, it has been given great attention. Since the implementation of the Bologna process in 1999, QA in higher education has been one of the main concerns. Quality culture has become a widespread concept in Zimbabwean higher education context of QA for the past years. In Zimbabwe and perhaps the entire African region, structured national QA processes in higher education are a very recent phenomenon and where these structures have been established, institutions face major capacity constraints. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of implementing QA in the Zimbabwean context of higher education. The study reports on the experiences of academics in implementing QA in two universities in Zimbabwe. From the study, it was shown that there concerns about the quality of higher education in Zimbabwe are on the rise and the major challenges where highlighted.

Key words: Higher education: quality assurance: teaching and learning, universities: Zimbabwe.

I. INTRODUCTION

The growing importance of human capital to the economic and social development of contemporary societies mandated the massification of higher education and subsequently (Albatch, 2013b) motivated a search for new methods of ensuring and improving academic standards. The combined impact of globalization and massification in higher education (Henkel, 2000) have radically altered the traditional relationships between state and institutions of higher learning and motivated policy makers to seek new ways and means for ensuring academic quality in higher education (World Bank 2002). At the close of the twentieth century, policy frameworks for higher education institutions underwent substantial reforms with many countries shifting from elite to mass education systems (Trow, 2005) and this has prompted the need for quality assurance mechanisms. While concerns for quality has always been in the increase and important feature of higher education (Rosa and Amarald, 2007, Vukasovic, 2014), what Newton, (2002) has dubbed as the quality revolution emerged as a world-wide phenomenon within the context of widening and deepening participation in higher education (Woodhouse, 2004). QA now tops the vast list of educational agenda of most governments and has been

promoted through regional and international co-operations. The concept of QA in higher education is widely used to denote the practices whereby academic standards, the level of academic achievement attained by higher education graduates, are maintained and improved (Materu, 2007). From the literature, there has not been much work done on regulation and improvement of higher education quality. Zimbabwe, in the search for a national framework that will encourage innovation, improve the quality of higher education and improve academic standards, policy makers are experimenting with many innovative forms of academic QA. However, there are multiple challenges that are faced in an effort to implement QA initiatives. As Zimbabwe look forward to tertiary education to make a significant contribution to economic growth and unlock the economic challenges facing the country, improvements in the quality of higher education institutions will be crucial. There is need to treat QA as a key component of strategies to improve higher education teaching and learning. The government of Zimbabwe has put in place several initiatives and organizations to support QA that seek to implement QA standards in higher education. For example, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established by act of parliament in 2006 and is responsible for accreditation of higher education. ZIMCHE is also mandated to ensure that institutions of higher learning demonstrate the achievement of acceptable standards in terms of physical, human, financial and material resources management and operational procedures and acceptable standards of academic life focusing on teaching, research, public and expert service. ZIMCHE carries out institutional and programme accreditation as a QA organ. Accreditation is seen as a process of external quality review to scrutinise institutions of higher education and their programmes for QA and quality improvement. ZIMCHE also conducts peer review panels to look at among other things:

- The provision of appropriate and safe facilities at institutions of higher learning
- Employment of qualified staff (setting standards for employment and promotion of staff)
- The lecturer to student ratio
- Library facilities and students' residence (infrastructure)

- Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and facilities
- Programme documents among other academic issues

Although QA seems to be coming more transnational in nature, in Zimbabwe only few studies on QA have been conducted. In addition, the purposes and practices of QA in Zimbabwe vary from one institution to the other. Some institutions focus on institutional performance assessments or on institutional learning while others pay attention to improving their academic and management activities. Zimbabwe is aiming at adopting international standards like the 2009 World Education (Boereen 2019) and the post 2015 as a public good and a strategic imperative for all levels of education and the basis for research, innovation and creatively, higher education must be a matter of responsibility and economic support for all governments. On the other hand, the Incheon Declaration 2015, which is committed to promoting quality lifelong learning opportunities for all, in all settings and at all levels of education. It is against this QA background that the aim of this study is to examine the challenges of implementing quality assurance in two universities in Zimbabwe. The study is expected to provide new knowledge on the implementation of QA across higher education institutions. The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the challenges of implementing QA in Zimbabwean higher education?
- What strategies can be adopted to enhance QA mechanisms in Zimbabwe?
- How have higher education institutions implemented QA standards from their perspectives?
- What are the best practices of QA in higher education?
- What is Zimbabwe higher education doing to promote a culture of quality higher education teaching and learning?
- What is the state of QA in Zimbabwean higher education institutions?

The six questions correspond with the focus of the study which is to examine the implementation of QA in higher education and reflect the diversity of implementing QA in promoting quality teaching and learning and are aligned to different dimensions of a quality management system.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

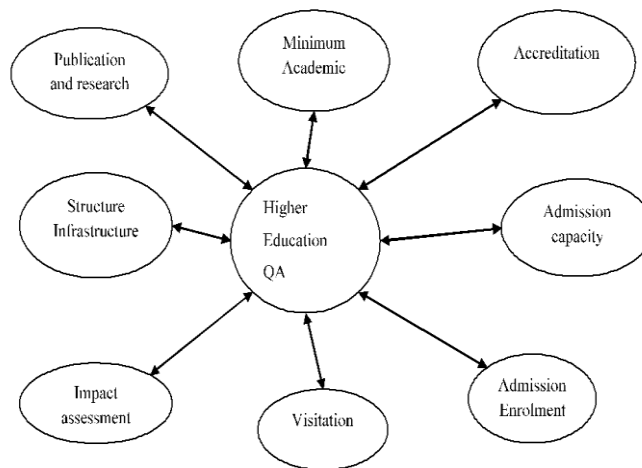
Quality Assurance in higher education

African universities have been urged to adopt and implement (Materu, 2007; World Bank 20002) the newly- developed African Standards and Guidelines for QA in higher education as part of a pan- continental move to improve higher

education quality. Karaim (2011) stated that at the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, UNESCO and its member states were called upon to pursue capacity building for QA in higher education in member states, particularly developing countries, and to put in place and strengthen appropriate QA systems and regulatory frameworks with the involvement of all stakeholders. Rezic, Majstorovic, Tomic (2010) argue that QA is the core of the Bologna process and that it should be recognized as an instrument for higher education strategic management, since it is an essential management activity where high quality can be expected. Materu (2007) defines QA as a planned and systematic review of an institution or program to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. In this study we argue that QA can be a driver for institutions to achieve excellence in higher education. In most African countries (Shabani2006)ensuring that the quality of educational standards simultaneously has become a great challenge(World Bank, 2002; Hou, 2012; Karaim 2011).

Higher Education Quality Assurance

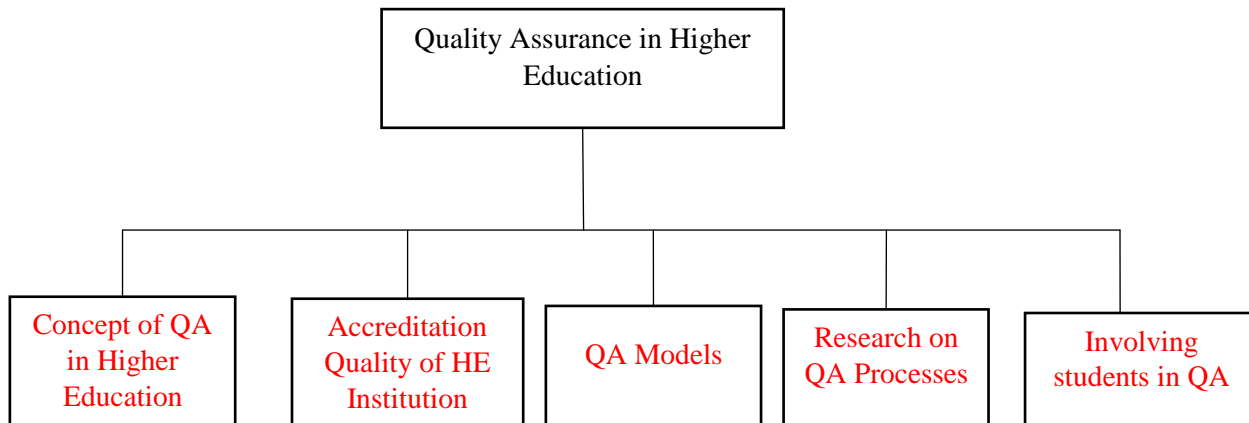
Academic QA can be referred to as ensuring that all the processes involved in the institution of students remain standardized at all levels and all times. Okabukola, (2004)states that it is a process of continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities which will be achieved via pathways of employing mechanisms internal and external to the system. UNESCO as cited in Omeregic, (2005) illustrates the QA model below;



Adapted from Omeregic 2005

On the other hand, Ryan 2015 provides a conceptual model of QA in higher education as illustrated below;

Conceptual model of quality assurance in higher education



Adapted from Ryan 2015

The common framework for a QA model would provide a consistent assessment of learning, design content, and pedagogy. Vlasceanu, Grunbergh and Parlea, (2007) argue that:

QA is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating the quality of a higher education system, institution, or programs. As a regulatory mechanism, QA focuses on both accountability and improvement providing information and judgments not ranking through an agreed upon and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal QA (institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external QA (ie) inter or supra institutional schemes assuring the quality of higher education institutions programs pp.74

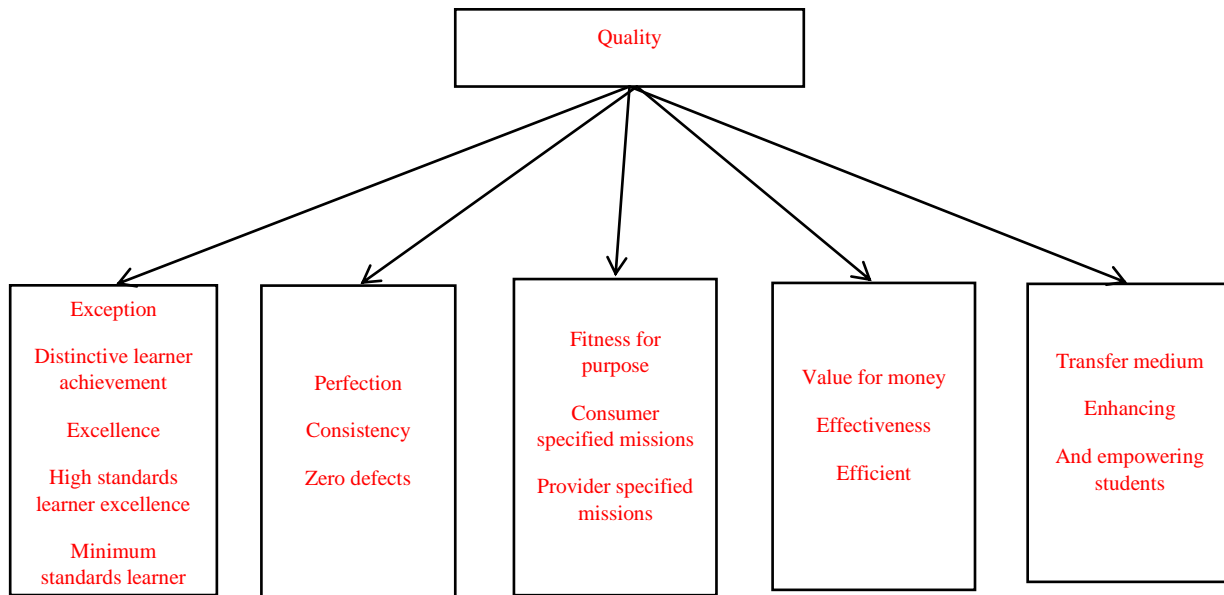
QA in higher education consist of a number of connected aspects and several purposes such as accountability, control, evaluation, measurement and quality improvement. Materu, (2007) defines quality assurance as: A systematic planned review of an institution or program to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met maintained and enhanced p.3.

A tertiary institution is only as good as the quality of its teaching staff, they are the heart of the institution (Tefferra 2015) who produce its graduates, its research products, and its services to the institution, community, and nation. Quality assurance is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality however defined and measured, is delivered and achieved by all members. In this context QA mechanisms or

activities depend on the existence of the necessary institutional mechanisms preferably sustained by a sold quality culture. Quality management, quality enhancement, quality control, and quality assessment are means through which quality is ensured. The European students' Union (2015) argue that, QA serves multiple purposes, enhancing learning and teaching, building trust among stakeholders throughout the higher education systems and increasing harmonization and comparability in the education system. Quality being a multidimensional concept that touches not only upon QA procedures, but also accessibility, employability, academic freedom, public responsibility for higher education and mobility (Newton 2003). While QA in higher education refersto a systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement, quality in higher education has the following categories:

- Exception; distinctive, excellence, passing a minimum standard.
- Perfection; zero defects, getting things right the first time, focus on process as opposed to inputs and outputs.
- Value for money; a focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring output against inputs.
- Fitness for a purpose; relates quality to a purpose, defined by the provider.
- Transformation; a qualitative change: education is about doing the best for the student as opposed to something for the consumer, includes concepts of enhancing and empowering (Harvey and Green (1993; Harvey and Newton (2003).

Quality in higher education consists of the key elements as shown on the figure below;



Adapted from Watty (2003:215)

Quality is a result of the interaction between academics, students and the institutional learning environment in which the content of programs, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for a purpose. We argue that QA includes all the attitudes, objects, actions and procedures, which through their existence and use, and together with the quality control activities, ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in and by each program. QA implies a determination to develop a culture of quality in an institution so that everyone is aware of his or her own part in sustaining and improving the quality of the institution. The range of definitions on QA show that there can be different foci in understanding and conceptualization of QA. Some concentrate more on maintaining a set of standards, others emphasize more on the improvement and enhancement aspects. Some definitions look at procedures, processes and mechanisms as being key, while others mention the culture of quality aspect, or stakeholder needs. The system level of understanding quality and QA will depend on the purpose the QA is supposed to fulfill.

Challenges of providing QA in higher education

Compared to the developed countries like Europe, Australia and the United Kingdom, QA systems of higher education in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular are still at an infant stage and thus confronted by many challenges. Materu (2007) tell us that, little is available in the literature on what African countries are doing to regulate and improve higher education quality, what it takes to implement these initiatives, what has been the impact, and what are the priorities for capacity building. Existing QA structures are young, the majority have been established within the last 10 years. As indicated before the main challenges to QA systems in Zimbabwe are cost and human capacity requirements. Operating a national QA agency (Alzafari, 2019) typically entails a huge budget and

requires appropriately trained and experienced staff. Investing in higher education teaching and learning institutions and research and development are important as investing in physical capital and physical infrastructure such as roads bridges and railway lines. According to Lomas (2004; Given and Galen 2015) if quality is to be embedded successfully in a university, then high-level management and leadership commitment and abilities will be crucial in achieving this. Mokhlar, Abdullah, Kardi, and Yacob, (2013) also concur that top management of an institution play an important role in driving the organization to quality improvement and organizational excellence. Clause 5.1 of the ISO Standards on management commitment noted that, top management shall provide evidence of its commitment to the development and implementation of the quality management system and continually improve its effectiveness by communicating to the organization the importance of meeting customer as well as statutory and regulatory requirements (Askartsolution.com ISO 9001: 2015). Materu (2007) argue that, effective QA depends largely on the availability of highly qualified faculty members and administrators within institutions and competent professionals and technical staff in national QA agencies. The process of implementing effective QA requires an additional set of skills in order to ensure that the work is credible and has its own internal quality guarantees. The presence of senior staff with experience in higher education processes is critical and necessary to provide for QA in education (Newton, 2010).

Finally, the question of how effective QA systems should be designed and implemented is subject to debate. There is still a lack of clarity about what the purpose of QA should be, about the adequateness of diverse methods and instruments used by QA mechanisms, or concerning the consequences of quality monitoring results. Identifying the features of effective QA systems is rendered more complicated by the difficulties in

measuring the effectiveness of the QA system. In some cases, it is difficult to know how the quality of education would have changed without the implementation of QA processes. It is not easy to measure the outcome of quality in higher education.

Methods and context

The purpose of this qualitative study imbedded in an interpretivist paradigm was to explore the challenges of implementing QA in two universities in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research approach embedded in an interpretive paradigm was considered the most appropriate to establish the experiences of participants in their implementation of QA standards. The two universities were chosen on the basis that they established QA in their management structures. The study adopted the epistemology of constructivist interpretivist view who claim that knowledge and meaning is not discovered but constructed. Employing interpretivist assumptions (Loseke, 2013) the study seeks to establish how participants make meaning of their experiences with implementing QA in their institutions. Participants in this study were drawn from a cross-section of different faculties who were chosen purposefully based on three criteria: they were full time academic members who were either senior lecturers or professors and are knowledgeable on the operation of QA, were willing to share and participate in the study and represented different disciplinary areas. The interpretive paradigm enabled the researcher to see, hear and understand the particular meaning making inherent in people's lives within the selected universities.

III. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To gather a breadth of contextual information about each case, we took descriptive field notes detailing information that was provided by each participant that we directly heard and recorded. It was important that the lived experiences of the study participants be allowed to tell the narration of the research study. The process of collecting data involved primary in-depth interviews with each participant responding to the common questions from the interviewer. The important point was to describe the meaning of the phenomenon from people who experience QA implementation in their institutions. Purposive sampling was considered a valid form of sampling where the researchers chose information rich cases who were interviewed. Data was predominately collected through telephone interviews and skype since the bulk of the data was collected in March and April during the Covid-19 lockdown. Participants were asked questions regarding their views on the implementation of QA, their insights and conceptions on the major challenges they realized in maintaining the quality of student learning especially in the context of rapid expansions in higher education. QA directors from the two universities were also interviewed. Creswell (2013) shows that interviews with participants in their natural settings present the researcher with the means to obtain the participants' experiences, knowledge, thoughts and feelings. Data was collected by means of an approximately 30-40

minutes telephone interview with each participant. Additional data was collected through internet engagements. Creswell (2013) asserts that data gathering through the internet has the advantage of cost/time efficiency in terms of reduced cost for travel and data transcription. It also provides participants with time and space flexibility that allows them more time to consider and respond to requests for information. Online data collection helped to create a non-threatening and comfortable environment, and provided greater ease for participants discussing and raising sensitive issues. During interviews we followed Bernard's (2002) lead, the idea was to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace. We collected numerous types of data so as to locate the cases within their contextual nuances (Creswell, 2013).

In seeking trustworthiness, the researcher should be concerned with the activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The following steps were taken to promote confidence that the researchers accurately recoded the phenomenon under investigation. Before the interviews we made contact with each participant through their emails and telephonically to establish a relationship of trust and rapport, and they were not put under any pressure to share their views. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, we also used Creswell's (2014) norms of trustworthiness. These are prolonged engagement, which is investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purpose, learning from the participants, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions of the self or the participants, and building trust. We used multiple data sources and multiple methods of collecting data as a way of providing for triangulation. Data analysis began by transcribing interviews and reading these several times to make sense of the data (Creswell, 2013; 2014). Interview information was recorded and this process yielded several key patterns, themes and categories. Finally, findings were presented under the main overarching themes based on the interview questions.

IV. FINDINGS

The key objective of the study was to establish aspects of higher education that constrained the agency of the universities to implement QA standards with a specific focus on two universities in Zimbabwe which participated in the study. We approached this objective by conducting interviews with academics who responded to open ended interview questions. The common and major interview questions were the bases of the study findings. Grounded in the accounts of the study participants, the descriptive narrative highlights the key findings of the study. Qualitative analysis of data was conducted using frameworks consistent with the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2014). Once the interviews had been conducted and were transcribed, we captured the accounts of the lived experiences of each participant on spreadsheets.

Challenges of implementing QA in Zimbabwe higher education

As indicated before, compared to more developed higher education institutions the world over, QA systems in Zimbabwe were said to be at an infant stage and that confronted by multiple challenges. One of the directors of one of the QA unit that was established in 2018 commented to say:

Structured QA process in our university is facing several challenges, except for the Zimbabwe Open University most of our QA structures are just a recent development, they are young, I am only one year here and I haven't seen evidence of effective QA and improvement activities at the institution. From the look of things especially in Zimbabwe, QA practices are unaffordable, given existing constraints in capacity and the lack of funds.

Much research in the context of Zimbabwe and perhaps the entire African region (Mohamedbhai, 2008, 2014; Akalu, 2016; World Bank, 2009; Odhiambo, 2011; Teferra 2015) and even in some developing countries (Alzafari and Ursin 2019) has shown that the marriage between expansion and QA has not always been easy given the capacity constraints universities are facing. This was further reinforced in this study.

It was evident from the data provided by interviewed academics who identified and summarized the key challenges of implementing QA as:

- Increased higher education enrollments against insufficient human resource capacity.
- Insufficient funding at institutional levels.
- Lack of clear strategy and national QA policy.
- Overlapping mandates with professional associations and with other tertiary QA bodies.
- Insufficient and ineffective communication within institutions about external QA processes.
- Lack of incentives and rewards to enforce compliance.
- Lack of standards and mechanisms to regulate quality of education.
- Lack of professional development for all those involved in QA for systems conceptualization.
- Lack of skills to effectively implement QA processes among all involved including those in QA structures.
- Lack of qualified staff to run QA structures.
- Scarcity of competent academics and professionals who could serve as peer reviewers.
- Risk of over- bureaucratization of the QA rather than a genuine reflection and improvement.
- Lack of human capacity building for academics on QA.

Similarly, comments made by QA directors from the two universities were collectively as follows:

- QA practices and processes not imbedded within the strategic plan of higher education institution for a successful implementation.
- Lack of a description of the structures, processes and responsibilities designed to enhance QA activities.
- Potential resistance from academics who view QA as an external process imposed on them.
- Lack of commitment to serve as peer reviewers among academics.
- Lack of involvement of stakeholders in implementing and developing QA policies.
- Inadequate government funding to support the operations of QA units in institutions.
- Lack of regional collaboration in higher education QA and harmonization of programmes and qualifications.
- Lack of a strong political will to support QA.
- Lack of policies and strategies to strengthen QA implementation and operations.
- The absence of political or civic pressure for government to contribute to the operations of QA in higher education institutions.
- Weak economic conditions to sustain the activities of QA units.
- QA units depending mainly on support from donors who remain the major source of funding.
- Limited tools and knowledge and also a lack of awareness of QA implementation.
- Lack of leadership for respective universities to strengthen their QA systems.
- The absence of a common set of activities that constitute QA, especially at the institutional level.
- University structures remain highly inflexible and resistant to change.

Findings from both academics and QA directors point to the key issues on the need to establish policies and strategies to ensure effective implementation of QA and put in place competent internal and external peer reviewers as one of the directors indicated:

While external peer reviewers are needed to augment our limited country capacity, the costs for visiting are high, universities cannot afford and depending on the length of the stay. The inclusions of foreign specialists have advantages in providing expertise and in ensuring international benchmarks, but international scholars are costly to manage.

This was supported by another QA director from another university who remarked that:

Costing of QA processes and activities are not easy in our institutions mainly because there are many hidden costs that are involved. There is critical

shortage of financial resources to support QA including the lack of priority in our management budgeting. Sustainable funding of institutional QA structures in our universities is a major challenge. Long-term commitment from the university or even donors is needed to facilitate stability in planning and development, but such commitment has so far not been forthcoming.

Another director who is from a university that has a long-established QA also remarked that:

In our universities there is a potential resistance of QA from academics who are viewing QA as something done on them rather than an integral part of what they do something done to improve the quality of teaching and continuous improvement. There is also the high risk of insufficient academic buy in for the development of QA or the lack of academic ownership of the QA process, which prevents the whole process from having an impact on the quality of the everyday operations and our teaching and learning.

Throughout the interviews, participants were quick to point out that, effective QA depends largely on the availability of highly quality members to run the QA unit and administrators within the institutions. It emerged from the study findings that the success of accreditation, audits, external reviews, evaluations and academic reviews are particularly demanding of competent human capacity and where possible the inclusion of foreign specialists, who can provide expertise in areas where local talent is limited and helping to ensure international benchmarks.

In this study all participants were quick to point out that, effective QA depends largely on the availability of qualified both academic and administrative staff within the institutions. Key among the findings were the costs of running an effective QA unit.

Study interviews revealed that the success of accreditation and audits and credibility of the results is dependent on the quality, dedication and integrity of the people who serve as peer reviewers, administrators and faculty members who prepare the self-assessment and collect needed data and professional staff in the institutional QA structure who eventually implement the review recommendations. Most people involved in QA processes and reviews must not only be experts in their respective fields, but they must also be acceptable as skilled, diplomatic and competent to conduct effective site visits and QA audits. As highlighted in the study even in countries like South Africa which has strong economies there are several constraints in funding sufficient academics who are qualified and available to serve as peer reviewers, or providing appropriate training for those involved in QA. All in all, the study findings pointed to the critical shortage and scarcity of competent academics and professionals who could serve as peer reviewers.

Materu(2007) also tell us that even in South Africa, with a very large base of experienced faculty members and a sizable pool of outstanding professionals there was consensus that the magnitude of the audit and accreditation process was requiring too much time from administrators and teaching staff. The added roles of existing load of committee meetings and issues of transformation in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and the demands on staff is perceived to have contributed to a significant decline in research publications and other academic outputs. In Zimbabwe the challenge is how to achieve a healthy balance among the desire to excel in accordance with international standards, the mandate to respond to national needs and expectations, and the constraints in resources to run an effective QA and these have remained a perennial problem.

Strategies to enhance QA in higher education

Systematic QA processes are now in place in some of the universities in Zimbabwe and there is need to strengthen their operations through adopting strategies that can enhance their operations. The most critical strategy for implementing effective QA systems identified during the study interviews was the need for practical training. Study participants indicated that there was no formal training available in the area of quality assurance. QA training is needed to provide exposure to higher education QA processes. Such training can be obtained through attending conferences, spending some time in institutions of higher learning, study visits to other QA agencies and in-house writing workshops and seminars on QA topics. Participants highlighted the following strategies for enhancing QA:

- Providing and establishing memoranda of understanding (MoU) with other quality assurance agencies for staff exchange and training.
- Active learning through regular in-house reviews of the agency's work is a powerful and cost-effective way to strengthen agency staff capacity and build team spirit.
- Providing adequate management capacity at the institutional and national level.
- Setting up regional and sub-regional networks to facilitate sharing of experiences and expertise in quality assurance.
- Put in place policies to empower national agencies to accredit programs in higher education institutions.
- Investing more financial resources in the operations of quality assurance units.
- Universities should seek to achieve a healthy balance among the desire to excel in accordance with international standards.
- Adopting transparent merit-based staff recruitment processes.
- Providing staff workshops and seminars.
- Promoting further studies for staff members.

- Developing a quality culture which promotes the willingness of academic staff to make use evidence produced QA procedures to innovate their teaching and their attitudes towards higher education scholarships of teaching and learning.
- Promoting a culture of teaching and learning in the institution.
- QA should not be seen as both a bureaucratic burden and an illegitimate interference from a central management.
- Creating shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality teaching and learning.
- Creating individual commitment to strive for quality.
- Design principles and guidelines on how to ensure the implementation of quality assurance.
- Prepare formal quality manuals to save as the guide of QA.
- Capacity building among members.
- Building a culture of quality in institutions of higher learning through establishing quality circles.
- Institutional academic review and academic audits.
- Training staff on self-evaluation and peer reviewing.
- Establishment of a dedicated QA structure within the institution which helps to ensure monitoring and evaluation of QA processes.
- Ensuring the implementation of recommended quality improvement measures.
- Partnership with foreign institutions and QA agencies with sound QA experiences which helps to bring in relevant experience from other regions.
- Adopting external examiner systems which help to maintain academic standards.
- Using external examiners from neighboring countries.
- Setting minimum academic standards.
- Conducting annual performance monitoring.
- Adopting robust communication strategy in implementing QA processes especial where external reviews or site visits are involved.

Data collected through the interviews with participants shows that the effective implementation of quality assurance in higher education depends largely on the availability of highly qualified faculty members. One of the participants remarked that the difficulty of finding a sufficient number of academics who are qualified and available to serve as peer reviewers has been a challenge and universities need to engage senior staff with experience on issues of accreditation, audits and most importantly academic review. From the point of view of academic staff who formed part of this study, QA should not be an ending process for maintaining and improving quality, rather it should be a system of evaluation and checking errors, which should involve strategies of involving systematic and integrative management procedures which should be employed to ensure quality.

The study confirmed that the adoption of a QA policy manual was crucial by highlighting step by step and activities to enhance the achievement of quality in teaching and learning. One of the study participants remarked that:

A QA policy manual helps to explain the job description and performance standards and how feedback would be provided, and how various incentive systems related to performance are provided. A QA policy manual helps staff to perform their daily tasks and also triggers the realization that their knowledge and skills could be improved and performance indicators could always be raised.

Comments made by all participants confirmed that higher education institutions need to adopt strategies that would provide for continuous quality improvements in teaching and learning.

How higher education institutions implement QA standards.

Within higher learning institutions, use of external examiners, self-evaluation and academic audits are the most common forms of QA processes. In this study participants identified the following key activities involved in implementing QA:

Evidence from the study suggest that the right to quality higher education is a fundamental human right and higher education represents exceptionally rich cultural and scientific asset for both individuals and society.

Participants argued that internal quality assurance in universities have a greater impact on the actual quality of teaching and learning. Quality improvement is guaranteed through well designed quality assurance structures, procedures and training programs for members of staff.

One of the participants commented:

What is crucial about QA is to ensure that we try to implement recommendations that are given by the external examiners and if funds allow. There is need to establish memoranda of agreement (MoAs) with other universities even for staff exchange, this strengthens the operations of our own QA units.

All the people who were interviewed expressed their commitment to the QA process implementation, and indicated that site visits were thoughtful fair and useful and believed that accreditation, reviews processes and audits were making a significant contribution to improve quality higher education. As one quality assurance directors put it:

Without the accreditation process, peer review and continuous communication on quality culture, no doubt the Zimbabwe quality on higher education could be rotten.

Finally, findings from our study show that there are multiple challenges faced by Zimbabwe higher education in implementing QA Standards.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges of implementing QA in higher education, the following opinions and recommendations for consideration by QA practitioners are made:

- The introduction of modern, effective QA system in higher education is a precondition to fulfill functions of higher learning institutions.
- The development of an institutional QA framework should not be done by importing models from elsewhere, it should be designed considering local circumstances, corresponding with clearly defined institutional objectives. It should aim at attaining objectives defined and understood at the institutional level.
- Adoption of a stepwise development strategy, which is the most prudent approach because the convergence on rigorous QA practices is unaffordable, given existing constraints in capacity. Each institution needs to assess its capacity and structure its QA systems to match available resources.
- Capacity building efforts should be made and directed towards building a culture of quality within higher education institutions.
- Involving peer reviewers from other institutions within or outside Zimbabwe in self-assessment exercises can enrich the process of QA.
- Establishing a dedicated QA unit in the university helps to ensure monitoring and evaluation of QA processes, maintains institutional memory and ensures implementation of recommended quality improvement measures.
- Where there is a main constraint on QA programs, accreditation should be best limited to professional programs and conducted in collaboration with professional association.
- Government should consider reviewing higher education funding policies such that allocation for public resources to higher education is linked to quality improvement as a strategy for encouraging institutions to undertake quality improvement.
- Since quality in higher education is perceived as a major drive for national economic development and competitiveness, governments should put considerable pressure on educational institutions to ensure quality of education and also that institutions respond by planning quality enhancement mechanisms at the top of their strategic agenda, paying due attention to the competitiveness of the education market.
- Finally, further work on the link between QA and labor market is recommended, this will alternatively be undertaken at the national level since size, mix and level of development differs widely from one country to the other.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing discussions and findings from the study it is clear that concerns about the quality of higher education are on the rise in the context of Zimbabwean higher education and QA mechanisms are becoming priority themes in higher education strategic plans. QA is driven by the importance attached to higher education as a public good and as a driver of growth in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and more so the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 for transforming higher education. Within higher education in Zimbabwe, the use of external examiners, self-evaluation and academic audits were said to be the most common forms of QA processes.

Quality in higher education, depending on the context and definition selected, implies a relative measure of inputs, processes, outputs or learning outcomes and all these processes need to be monitored. The primary goal of quality assurance is to provide for a planned and systematic review process of the institution to ensure that acceptable standards of teaching and learning are achieved. QA systems consist of a number of connected aspects and several purposes such as; accountability, control, evaluation, measurement and quality improvement. QA in higher education is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure the desired quality, which are well defined and measured and delivered. It implies a determination to develop a culture of quality in an institution of higher education, so that everyone is aware of his own part in sustaining and improving the quality of the institution's teaching and learning. QA implementation challenges that are faced in Zimbabwean context of higher education, the major challenges highlighted are:

- Potential resistance from academics who view QA as an external process imposed on them.
- The risk of over bureaucratization of QA process.
- QA not considered as an opportunity for genuine reflection and improvement in teaching and learning.
- The risk of insufficient academics in the development of QA as academic ownership of the QA process.
- Lack of resources to support QA initiatives and sufficient funding.
- Lack of quality experts to conduct external reviews.
- Lack of leadership commitment to strengthen institutional QA.

These few examples of dilemmas and challenges have been highlighted in the study interviews and are mentioned only to signal some of the possible more sensitive aspects related to development and implementation of QA systems and mechanisms.

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