Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education from Instructors Perspectives in Rwanda; a Mirage or Reality

Dr. Alfred Otara[1]

Abstract

While increasing access to higher education in Rwanda remains to be an important objective of national development, this paper shows that quality of teaching and learning in higher institutions needs improvement. The paper aims at informing instructors, policy developers and university management who want to reflect more deeply upon their practice or gain a greater understanding about how theory and practice can be mapped together. The findings revealed that instructors do not adequately understand what comprehensively constitutes the curriculum, that curriculum development does not follow due process and the quality of teaching and learning is wanting. It also emerged that the current assessment procedure are not effective in measuring competencies as expected. From the findings it is argued that reforming practice requires transformations of understanding of principles of curriculum, teaching and learning that are assumed or are sometimes implicitly in the practices. Higher education in Rwanda needs to move first to address these issues in a way that is comprehensible to society, rather than through technical solutions of channeling out graduates that can be appreciated only by those inside higher education

Keywords: Quality assurance, Teaching and learning, Assessment, curriculum

1.0 Introduction

This century has brought profound challenges and opportunities to universities around the globe . Universities are primarily concerned with how to ensure the quality of their education and how to boost their local and global competitiveness. Universities are today compounded by the pressure from international competition, public accountability, increased student enrolment, liberalization of education system, globalization of education, and social economic dynamics. These factors exert demand on universities to continue to increase the importance of quality assurance. As a result of these pressures, universities have been challenged to maintain quality in curriculum development and delivery. As a system world-wide, higher education has not been sufficiently responsive to the growing sense of what it does and who it does it for. In this regard, calls for quality assurance are a sign that things should change as societies demand more accountability from their public institutions (Massaro, 1998). Although higher education has been forced into accepting quality assurance, there is still a mismatch between what it has been prepared to provide and what the public actually wants. (OECD, 2006).

Universities have historically undergone major changes and endured significant challenges (Sassower, 2000). Today's university is increasingly challenged to demonstrate its relevance, contributions and accountability to governments and their people. Frequent public outcry about the quality of higher education is slowly but steadily creating an impression that quality is elusive. Higher education no longer focuses solely on the interests of the élite but plays a role in educating the majority of a nation's population to fit in the emerging dynamic world. In this era of customer-driven demand for quality products, university should reconsider how it does its training. In this context, quality should be pursued by instructors in order to generate excellence in aspects of student preparation.

[1] Deputy Dean, School of Education, University of Rwanda, College of Education. Email: fredcoco2003@yahoo.co.uk

The efforts towards quality should be aimed at providing opportunities for students to make full use of training opportunities in achieving objectives with regard to competencies and skill formation for the 21st century and beyond. In realizing this university staff should be free to pursue knowledge wherever it may lead and however uncomfortable the results of that knowledge may be; with the aim of deciding on content to be taught and academic standards to be attained (Massaro. 2010). Recent work by Callan and Immerwahr (2008) indicates that this shared understanding, if it ever fully existed, given the frequent reference to universities as ivory towers, is under stress. It seems that universities are seen to be self-serving and unwilling to meet the changing needs of society. Since 1994, Rwanda has seen a remarkable increase in the number of higher Institutions of learning and the student enrollment has also continued to increase tremendously. However, even with these impressive developments the issue of quality faces significant challenges if universities have to fully contribute to national development.

1.1 Research Questions

The paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does curriculum development and implementation in higher education follow due process?
2. What are the internal quality assurance challenges in respect to instructors' experiences?
3. To what extent do quality assurance mechanisms facilitate achievement of learning outcomes?
4. Are assessment procedures in higher learning institutions effective?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Quality of higher education is only related with the opportunities for the self-development of the individual it can bring. Looking into the Humboldt theory of education as an ideal, the freedom of research and teaching is upheld as imperative, which is necessary as a basis and result for qualified processes of education. Quality should aim at complete training of the human personality, even for the poorest members of society at the elementary school level (Humboldt 1920). Student engagement should be the participation in educationally effective practices both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (Kuh etal 2007). They also stated that student engagement represents two critical features: the time and effort students put into their studies and other educational purposeful activities; and how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to encourage students to participate in activities that lead to the experience-desired outcomes. In improving the quality of teaching and learning student have a critical role to play. William (2006) contends that firstly, at institutional level, students could have three principal roles: providing information, participating in the preparation of self-assessment reports and as members of the bodies responsible of internal quality assurance processes. Learners must be actively engaged in the processing of information and that the teaching and learning process involves an interaction among the teacher, the students, and the content. Researchers Cobb, Yackel, and Wood (1992) describe the process in the following way: What is needed then is a comprehensive approach that allows for student construction of meaning while interacting with the content, the teacher, and other students. Higher education is therefore uniquely placed to develop the measures and metrics that will ensure that this need can be met and should take the initiative to do so, rather than continuing to replicate what has been practiced for centuries.

2.0 Teaching and Learning

Universities with explicit mission of concentration on teaching are often asked to indicate whether they have added value to their students to a level that will enable them to graduate with comparable qualifications globally. The quality of teaching is meant to assure society that higher education standards are adequate and that, globally they are comparable. Although society has accepted the autonomy status of universities in return for their dispassionate service to it, there has been an increasing demand for relevance and accountability. Students preferentially take in and process information in different ways and so teaching methods also vary. Some instructors lecture, others lead students to self-discovery; some focus on principles and others on applications; some emphasize memory and others understanding. However when mismatches exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the professor and curriculum goals, then the quality of teaching is at stake. Instructors may have good intentions in covering the subject matter but lose track of how much of that material really gets conveyed through taken-for-granted teaching modes. There is need for self-reflection about our teaching practices to avoid risk of continuing to teach others the way we learn best, assuming that this way will work for all students. In essence, instructors should make teaching and learning a dialogue and experiential.

In a number of ways, quality of processes is more difficult to address than products however, various kinds of learning supports may be provided by institutions like tutorial services, organized study groups, library access, and access to learning resources (COL, 1997).

2.1 Assessment for Quality

Evaluation for accountability has become an essential part of today's university and the system of higher education of which it forms a part. The assessment of students is a serious and often tragic enterprise.   Some lecturers become stuffy and formal when the talk turns to student assessment. It is as if they measure their own worth as and yet we should recognize that assessment is a way of teaching more effectively through understanding exactly what students know and do not know (Ramsden, 2003). It is about reporting on students' achievements and about teaching them better through expressing to them more clearly the goals of our curricula. It is about measuring student learning; it is about diagnosing misunderstandings in order to help students to learn more effectively. It concerns the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning.) There is an exact parallel between this approach to measuring teaching quality and unsatisfactory ways of assessing students. Methods of student assessment should always be secondary to the vital preliminary question: What do we want our students to know (about the subject)? The equivalent question in the case of academic staff is: What do we want our teachers to know about teaching their subjects? (Rowntree, 2004). Evaluation that will really improve teaching quality must follow similar principles to assessment that will genuinely help students to learn.

2.2 Quality in Higher Education

Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) contend that in resent past there has been significant growth of quality assurance activities aimed towards improving higher education at institutional, national, regional, and global levels. As a result of this governments have established national quality assurance and accreditation agencies (Bawati and Zuhairi, 2007). Despite this initiative the level of quality in universities is still wanting and some attribute this to the question of what constitutes quality. There is no widely accepted definition of quality in higher education and authors hold different views on the subject. Quality assurance is the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements (Harman, 2000). It can also be seen as the process of monitoring, evaluation or review of higher education in order to establish stakeholders confidence that it fulfils expectations or meets minimum requirements (Martin and Stella, 2007). While exploring the nature and usage of quality in relation to higher education, Harvey and Green (1993) observe that quality can be seen in terms of being: as exceptional; as fitness for purpose; as value for money; as perfection; and as transformation. Despite differences in opinion regarding quality, Briukhano, Kisele, TiMchenko and VdoVin (2010) say that enhancing an institution of higher learning's ability to compete depends on a number of factors, among which a key role must be played by the quality of the educational services provided. Viewed as the product of the institution's activity, they have the kinds of characteristics that meet or exceed customer expectations.

As different perspectives emerge about quality, universities are increasingly challenged to define graduate attributes comprising a set of skills and understandings beyond disciplinary content knowledge to prepare them as educated citizens who can think critically, problem-solve and add value to their communities Briukhano et al (2010).   More fundamentally, student learning if managed well across courses and qualifications is expected to lead to employment and self reflection in the real world Changes sweeping through countries today have made institutions to become actors of globalization. Regional trade agreements have certainly led to an unprecedented level of mobility in some professions. This has put greater pressure on governments to compare their national educational standards with those of other countries, and on institutions to confer recognized qualifications on an international labor market (Martin and Stella, 2007). However, assessing quality is not an easy task because there is no correlation between measurable indicators and quality one wants to measure that would allow for assessments by objective criteria alone. Implementing quality improvement involves substantial organizational change which in Stebbing (1989) view involves: preparing a systematic plan to describe how the quality improvement effort will be managed along with the on-going demand of the operation. It also requires providing appropriate orientation, training, and learning opportunities for everyone in the system, analysis of current situation to understand what changes are needed. Finally it is necessary to design methods to audit, learn from and stabilize the new quality improvement processes by identifying barriers and taking corrective actions. If universities are to continue to be perceived as adding value in educating the next generation and the scholars who will create and transmit new knowledge, academics have to engage with public demands for accountability. Universities can no longer be satisfied with simply selecting talent based on existing skills and expertise but must create talent and opportunity.

3.0 Methodology

This study mainly took a qualitative approach anchoring on classroom experiences of instructors engaged in higher learning institutions in Rwanda. Participants were selected using opportunity sampling methods from the population of university instructors registered in the postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in Higher Education that is offered by the University Of Rwanda College Of Education. A total of 50 instructors participated in this study during the academic year 2012-2013 and a further 48 participated in the academic year 2013-2014 Every effort was taken to ensure that all participants remained naïve to the true hypothesis of this study. Extensive written and focus group discussion were held. Data were collected in separate semesters of each cohort through the use of focus groups, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This mixed method approach allowed for triangulation of the data and gave rigor to the study. Discussion forums were analyzed for evidence of how participants different issues in regard to teaching and learning in higher education.   Throughout the study, participants were afforded opportunities to reflect on their teaching and to discuss changes in their perceptions and practices brought about through engaging with the inquiry process

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented and discussed thematically according to the research questions.

4.1 Issues in of Curriculum Development and its Implementation

It was clearly observed that higher learning institutions curriculum are lacking in developing problem solving skills and creativity and innovation in areas of entertainment as a way of focusing on talents. It was also revealed that in as much as entrepreneurship is taught it still remains abstract in respect to student being able to relate it to actual life experiences within economic provisions. The inadequacy of the curriculum was seen in light of not being focused on the job market and dynamics of the changing world expectations, As far as weaknesses in curriculum are concern, respondents identified a number of areas that are stil wanting. Evaluation mechanisms are still very weak, teaching methods remain to be traditional and do not appeal to the current generation of learners. Learning materials are inadequate and that learning remains overtly theoretical. It also emerged that there is a big miss match with reality, pre-requisites are often ignored and therefore student's background is rarely considered. It was also observed that there are frequent changes that affect curriculum stability. Curriculum reviews were seen to be done without adequate evaluation of existing one In response to whether curriculum development follows due process majority said no. This was attributed to lack of well drawn action plans right from the grass root level. Some areas lack specialists, Stakeholders are not involved and that there are constant changes that are unplanned for. Davis & Sumara (2006) argue that building and maintaining a well-performing educational system, which is able to cope with the complexity of modern societies, is a very challenging task. Learning is itself a highly complex process which involves many different factors and perspectives, such as individual sense-making, teacher-student relationships, classroom dynamics, school organizations, parental/guardian roles, community involvement, bodies of knowledge, and culture

4.2 Challenges of Quality

A number of future challenges were fore seen and majority felt that technology evolution will continue to exert pressure on higher learning institutions. Overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure development and resource acquisition also featured prominently. It also came out that universities will have to provide a business oriented education if they have to remain relevant. Poor quality standards and "intellectual illiteracy" were equally cited to be future challenges. In addition the issue of regional integration and harmonization of academic programs and standards across the East African community was seen to be very big challenge that will continue haunting higher learning institutions. Equally noticed is the huge demand for university education leading to devise different means resulting in the delivery of too much content within short periods of time, a strategy that many see to be compromising the quality of education. In their study, Abah, Mashebe and Denuga (2013) observe that the current educational systems, structures and practices are not sufficient to address and support the learning needs of all students in the 21st century. The rapid changes and increased complexity of today's world have led to the necessity to change and improve the preparation of students for productive functioning in the continually changing and demanding society. It should be recognized therefore that no single or uniform approach can be applied to completely overcome the challenges facing the quality of education.

4.2.1 Instructors Understanding of Curriculum Delivery

Regarding whether academics quite understand what constitutes the curriculum majority said 'no'. This was attributed to lack of training in pedagogy and curriculum. It also emerged that many academics lack commitment to the spirit of teaching in terms of understanding how learning takes place and the best methods of reaching out to students. It was also seen that there is no adequate continuous professional development in pedagogy in respect to the needs of current crop of students. This quite fits in Brownlee (2001) suggestion that teachers who hold relativistic epistemological beliefs are more reflective and more likely to employ constructivist educational theories and practices that lead to transformative teaching. It is significant that instructors are helped to clarify their epistemological beliefs and personal theories about teaching through discussion and guided reflection (Tanase & Wang, 2010). In this environment excellent teaching becomes an important mark of quality and competitiveness (Young, 2006)

4.3 Quality Assurance in Respect to Learning Outcomes

When asked whether quality assurance mechanism in higher learning institutions are effective, majority of the respondents said "No" .University graduates are lacking relevant practice experiences, critical thinking skills and problem solving skills. In addition, respondents said that graduates lack adequate communication skills and confidence in what they have. One respondent remarked "our graduates are not sure of their abilities and this is a reflection of how they have been prepared" In terms of strategies of improving quality assurance respondents were of the view that assessment standards need to be reviewed to reflect realities of changing times of course requirements and job demands. The monitoring system need to be strengthened by having a team rather than just an office. All colleges should have experts in charge of quality and adequate academic audit should be carried out regularly with close follow ups. Teaching should be organized in such a way as to allow for effective student teacher ratio to facilitate close monitoring of students progress. There is need to balance between theory and practice. This is in line with Short and Martin (2011) argument that whereas modern theories suggest that the teaching methods employed should aim to inspire the student to learn rather than simply provide them with knowledge. Higher education should aim to employ a greater use of methods utilized in the performance lecture in order to enhance learning.

It was interesting to deduce the rating of the value of degrees graduates are awarded vis a viz skills acquired. Majority were of the opinion that at the current state of affair, the two do not match. This was attributed to a number of factors including: too much theory, lack of competent teachers, students pursuing options not within their interest. University students seem to be after certificates and not acquisition of knowledge and skills expected because the curriculum is not rigorous. It was also pointed out that students are now developing an attitude to the fact that education is losing relevance and thus don't see the need for much commitment and hard work. This concurs with Oshagbemi (1997) observation that while the nature of higher education over the years has altered substantially in the face of larger class sizes containing a more diverse range of students, teaching methods appear to have remained somewhat stationary. These conflicting areas of change have led to a number of problems leading to dissatisfaction from both instructors and students. In their study Mann & Robinson (2009) also found that across many universities approximately 60 per cent of students report feelings of boredom during their classes thus reflecting on the relevance of pedagogy.

4.4 Quality of Assessment Procedures

Regarding whether assessment in universities is adequate, majority of respondents said "no". Reasons cited include large number of students; lackzity among lecturer in adhering to the spirit of assessment due to insufficient time. However assessment can be improved if adjustment is made on student teacher ratio, providing humble time for assessment and reinforcement of academic quality assurance. Equally important is that assessment should be comprehensive and not just based on examinations only Assessment of students through a collective group work was seen to be ineffective in fact all respondents reacted with a resounding "no", However it was noted that group work can be improved if carefully monitored , assigning different roles to individuals within a group, requiring individual presentations, having smaller group and also using tutorial assistants in guiding discussions. Participants agreed that it is difficult to create a balance in workload to allow a sufficient focus on teaching and feedback to meet student.

It should be recognized that assessment is a way of teaching more effectively through understanding exactly what students know and do not know (Ramsden, 2003). It is about reporting on students' achievements and about teaching better through expressing to them more clearly the goals the curricula. More significantly, it is about diagnosing misunderstandings in order to help students to learn more effectively.

It concerns the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning. In the context of quality assurance, the concept of quality control already includes not only the control of the final product quality, but also the control of the process.

5.0 Conclusion

In today's competitive world universities are positioning themselves to be world-class, research-intensive in delivering teaching and facilitating learning of the highest quality and to play a leading role in social economic development. With this vision higher learning institutions in Rwanda cannot be left behind and this call for rethinking the quality of teaching and learning as opposed to the number of graduates being channeled out. There is a need for the public and students to be assured that the standard of degrees is both guaranteed and internationally comparable, so that graduates can move easily between countries as their careers develop.

5.1 Recommendations

In addressing a number of challenges facing the quality of teaching and learning in higher institutions curriculum should be made to be flexible allowing students to pursue their best passionate choices and that unlike the way programs are structured now they should allow for electives. There should be proper curriculum evaluation before review or development of new ones, regular monitoring of implementation of curriculum up to the classroom level should be enhanced. It is also recommended that improving student teacher ratio should be considered to encourage personalized learning. Bench marking should be empressed as a way of learning best practices from other institutions. Programs should be designed is such a way that learning is not grade based but rather competence based. There is also need for commitment by senior management to make quality the basis for overcoming nonconformance by setting standards and criteria to structure, process, and maintain outcomes for quality management. There should be allocation of the system and resources to support the process of quality development. Finally it is critical to develop systems to assure that quality is built in at the beginning and throughout teaching and learning process by a quality organ that is independent.

References

Abah, J., Mashebe, P. &, Denuga, D (2013) The Learning Challenges and Pedagogical Perspective in a Complex Education System Asian Journal of Education and e-Learning 1(5)311-316 .Retrieved from www.ajouronline.com

BriukhanoV, V.M. kiseleV, V.i. TiMchenko, n.s. and VdoVin, V.M. (2010). Monitoring the Opinions of Parents of College Students as a Component of the Institution's In-House Education Quality Management System. Russian Education and Society, vol. 52, no. 5, May 2010, pp. 79–88.

Brownlee, J. (2001). Knowing and learning in teacher education: A theoretical framework of core and peripheral epistemological beliefs. Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education and Development, 4(1), 167-190.

Callan, P., & Immerwahr, J. (2008, January 11). What colleges must do to keep the public's good will? The Chronicle of Higher Education, 54, p. 18.

Cobb, P., Yackel, E., & Wood, T. (1992). A constructivist alternative to the representational view of mind in mathematics education. Journal for Research in Mathematics Education23(10), 2-33.

COL (1997). Planning and Management of Distance Education: Commonwealth of Learning website. London: Commonwealth of Learning and International Extension College.

Davis, B., & Sumara, D. (2006). Complexity and education - inquiries into learning, teaching and research. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, USA.

Harman, G. (2000). Quality assurance in higher education. Bangkok: Ministry of University Affairs & UNESCO PROAP.

Harvey L. & Green D. (1993). Defining Quality. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 18(1): 9-34

Humboldt W.V. (1920). Gesammelte Schriften. 1st ed. Berlin: Preussischen Akademie der wissenschaften. 13 vol.

Kuh G.D. et al. (2007). Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations. AShigher education Higher Education Report, 32(5): 1-182

Mann, S. & Robinson, A. (2009). Boredom in the lecture theatre: An investigation into the contributors, moderators and outcomes of boredom amongst university students. British Educational Research Journal, 35(2), 243–258.

Martin, M. and Stella, A. (2007).External quality assurance in higher education: making choices. Paris: United Nations

Massaro, V. (2010) The relevance and impact of quality assurance Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management. Vol. 32, No. 1, February 2010, 17–26

Massaro, V. (1998). Las Respuestas Institucionales para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad. In La Calidad en la Educación Superior en México: Una Comparación Internacional. Mexico City:

Organization for Economic Cooperation Development [OECD]. (2006). OECD Education Meeting of Ministers, Chair's Summary. Retrieved December 9, 2009, from

   http://www.oecd.org/site/ 0, 3407,en_21571361_36507471 1 1 1 1 1 ,00.html

Oshagbemi, T. (1997). The influence of rank on the job satisfaction of organizational members. Journal of Managerial Psychology, 12(8), 511–519.

Ramsden, P.(2003)Learning to teach in higher education 2nd Ed. London: Routledge Falmer

Rowntree, D. (2004). Assessing students: How shall we know them? London: RoutledgeFalmer

Sassower, R. (2000) A Sanctuary of Their Own: Intellectual Refugees in theAcademy. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Short, F., & Martin, J. (2011). Presentation vs. Performance: Effects of lecturing style in Higher Education on student preference and student learning. Psychology teaching review17 (217)

Stabbing, L. (1989). Quality assurance: The route to efficiency and competitiveness (2nd ed). C`dchester, UK: Ellis Harwood Ltd.

Tanase, M., & Wang, J. (2010). Initial epistemological beliefs transformation in one teacher education classroom: Case study of four preservice teachers. Teaching and Teacher Education, 26, 1238-1248

Tian Belawati,T.& Zuhairi,A. (2007) The Practice of a Quality Assurance System in Open and Distance Learning: A case study at Universitas Terbuka Indonesia International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning Volume 8, Number 1.

Williams, P. (2006). In: Alaniska H. et al. (eds.) Student involvement in the processes of quality assurance agencies. Helsinki: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Young, P. (2006). Out of balance: Lecturers' perceptions of differential status and rewards in relation to teaching and research. Teaching in Higher Education,11(2),191-202. doi: 10.1080/13562510500527727