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Questioning the efficacy of quality assurance frameworks for teaching and learning: a case study from East Africa

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly across many jurisdictions, external quality assurance agencies are requiring higher education institutions to develop internal quality assurance systems that grant ownership of programme improvement to those implementing teaching and learning. Whilst this development is laudable, the quality assurance frameworks used for this process appear to focus on a comprehensive list of 'cells' and criteria against which to assess academic standards. However, these standards vary in their degree of relevance to teaching and learning and are not always evidence-based. An internal quality assurance framework used across East Africa is analysed and comparisons are made with indicators of quality that are known to affect teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. These comparisons highlight the need for quality assurance agencies to develop internal quality assurance frameworks for programme review that focus on the quality of the learning experience to ensure improved programme provision.

KEYWORDS

Quality assurance frameworks; internal quality assurance; programme quality; teaching and learning; higher education

Introduction

Building and investing in a sound higher education system is the key to forging the future of nations, and will yield 'an inclusive and diverse knowledge society to advance research, innovation and creativity' (Teferra, 2013, p. 2). For meaningful and sustainable development, it is imperative that appropriate resources are committed to ensuring the quality of programmes in higher education (Teferra, 2013).

A growing recognition of the potential contribution that higher education can make to a country's overall growth (Kadhila & Lipumbu, 2019; Leiber, 2018; Bloom *et al.* 2006) has seen a rapid expansion of higher education in East Africa, particularly in the last two decades. In the 1960s, at the time at which Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania had just received their independence, there were only three universities serving Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Today, there are over 100 universities in the region, if one includes Rwanda and Burundi.

This 'proliferation' of universities in the East African region, and indeed virtually everywhere (the United Kingdom (UK) now has well over 100 universities) raises numerous questions about the quality of education as well as about the quality processes in place at the tertiary level. Most of the universities in the region are quite new and are still trying to establish the ethos and conditions peculiar to a university. This necessary development brings its own special difficulties, particularly in the area of the quality of programmes offered and the teaching and learning opportunities provided to students of these universities. A study commissioned by the Inter University Council for East Africa (2014) found that across the countries of East Africa, between 51% and 63% of the graduates were perceived by employers to lack competencies for the job market (IUCEA 2014).

This scenario has prompted, again in almost all countries, the establishment of regional and national regulatory bodies and frameworks aimed at ensuring quality assurance as well as overseeing compliance with national regulations. This regulatory environment in turn has led to the establishment of quality assurance units as well as centres aimed at promoting excellence in teaching within individual universities. These units are tasked with implementing the frameworks and guidelines issued by the national bodies. Whilst these university units are not a panacea for the perceived poor quality of programmes in some universities, this response can, nevertheless, be viewed as an appropriate strategy in addressing some of the concerns. However, little is said or written about the challenging and arduous journey of improving and enhancing quality within universities, especially for those who are charged with leading the schools and faculty members in these processes. This paper attempts to address some aspects of this gap.

Quality enhancement: a focus on teaching and learning in higher education

As universities have expanded globally and student enrolment has increased massively in higher education there has been more demand for quality in higher education (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998; Altbach *et al.*, 2019). This demand has seen the establishment of quality assurance units and teaching centres to support the quality of teaching as well as the development of teaching and quality assurance frameworks within universities and at the national level. Whilst accountability remains the central purpose of quality 'assurance', there has been an added emphasis on 'improvement' in some jurisdictions, as is the case of East Africa. This has led to a shift of focus from quality 'assurance' as a form of accountability to quality enhancement to support 'improvement' in the system (Williams, 2016).

The establishment of systems, both national and within universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, to address quality concerns has met with both successes and challenges. According to Matere (2007) and others (Kadhila & Lipumbu, 2019; Dakovic & Gover, 2019) the establishment of both regional and national regulatory bodies has assisted many higher education institutions to improve their

standards. They have set the benchmarks for the provision of quality programmes, and have assisted universities to establish internal quality assurance units as well as to improve quality of provision in general. Apart from their advisory role, the national bodies also often monitor and accredit programmes offered by institutions.

Research shows that strong external quality assurance without equally strong internal quality assurance does not guarantee real improvement in quality (ENQA, 2010; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Poole, 2010; Kadhila & Lipumbu, 2019). Universities therefore need to have strong internal quality assurance policies, processes and measures to complement the external quality assurance measures in order to ensure genuine, visible and measurable quality improvement.

For the last two decades, concerns have been raised about the impact of quality assurance processes and their effectiveness in achieving lasting quality improvements (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001). Tam (2001, p. 48) pointed out that the 'complexity and quality of the educational process and student experience is not readily captured by any form of objective measures using numbers and scores'. She and others (Bok, 2015, p. 24) further noted that many outputs of universities, particularly graduate outcomes, are not amenable to quantitative measurement. At the same time, it is widely accepted that quality assurance is based on the premise that everyone in the institution has a responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of its product or service, including teaching. Hence, enhancement of teaching quality needs to be viewed as part of the quality assurance processes. Gosling and D'Andrea (2001, p. 10) underscore this line of thought: 'If the current quality management systems in higher education do not contribute to the improvement or enhancement of the educational experience or positively impact on student learning, they are essentially an expensive exercise in futility'. A decade later, Gibbs (2010, p. 5) contended that

what best predicts educational gain is measures of educational process: what institutions do with their resources to make the most of whatever students they have. The process variables that best predict gains are not to do with the facilities themselves, or to do with student satisfaction with these facilities, but concern a small range of fairly well-understood pedagogical practices that engender student engagement.

More recently, Leihy & Salazar (2017, p. 7) underscored the concept of 'quality beyond measure' whilst Houston and Hood (2017) highlight the relationship between university preparation programmes and quality enhancement in higher education settings.

A regional quality assurance framework

As the East African Community came together as an economic community, the newly created Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) was mandated to work

with the various commissions of higher education, particularly in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, to harmonise higher education structures in order to enable mobility of students and graduates across the region. Initiatives being implemented in East Africa to bolster the quality and harmonisation of curricula included subject benchmarking; the credit and accumulation transfer system that sets minimum academic standards for different disciplines and programmes; implementation of a regional higher education qualifications framework; and principles and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education in East Africa. In this regard, the IUCEA partnered on the Dialogue on Innovative Education Strategies initiative with the German Academic Exchange Service and the German Rectors' Conference to enhance the quality of higher education in East Africa.

Learning from the Bologna harmonisation process in Europe, the IUCEA developed a quality assurance handbook *A Road Map to Quality*. The handbook includes four volumes to support universities in East Africa to implement good practices in quality assurance at the programme and institutional level, as well as to guide establishment of effective internal quality assurance mechanisms and directorates in universities in the region that are aligned to international standards. The IUCEA partnered with the regulatory commissions of higher education and selected universities to pilot the first of these handbooks, *Volume 1: Guidelines for Self-Assessment at Program Level* (IUCEA, 2010). This quality assurance framework for programme assessment on 'Teaching and Learning' identifies 18 cells to outline the parameters for quality assessment (Figure 1).

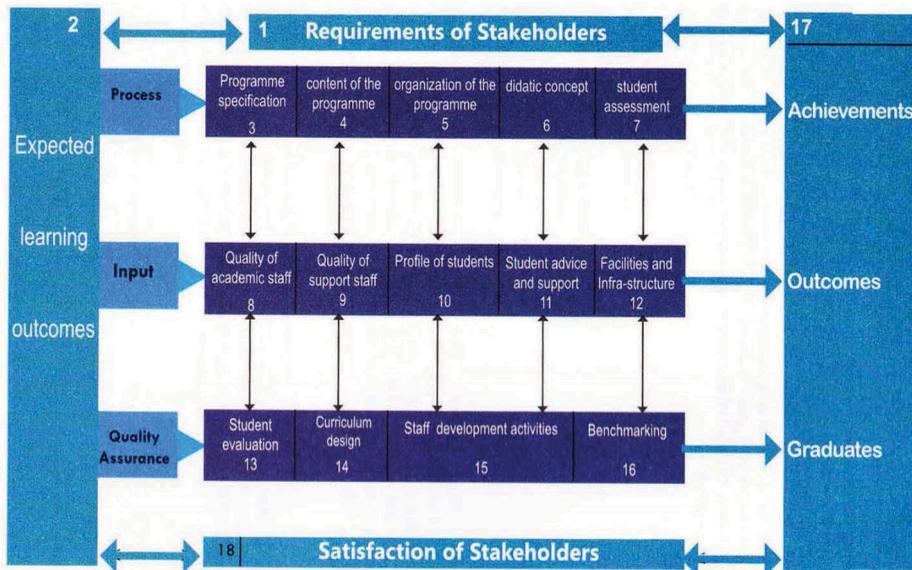


Figure 1. The IUCEA programme quality assurance model.

Source: IUCEA, 2010, p. 10

Reflections on the model

This approach is similar to models and policies developed elsewhere (for example, in Canada [Alberta and Ontario], Europe and the UK) displaying the basic characteristics of this model: in brief, it is extensive, elaborate and extremely comprehensive, indeed even cumbersome, qualities that were deemed essential 'best practice' at the time. That thinking also contains some assumptions that are manifestly fallacious: that 'one size can fit all cases' (Ashour, 2017), and that all measures are of equal importance in assessing the quality of a programme (Gibbs 2010, Leihy & Salazar, 2017).

The above process will be familiar to those involved with internal quality assurance in higher education as a comprehensive and standard way of assessing programme quality with the claimed emphasis being that this measures the quality of teaching and learning activities and curriculum development (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019). However, one of the authors, in her role as leader of a recently established quality assurance unit of the Aga Khan University, that is integrated with the teaching and learning support unit, has now reflected on 13 programme reviews that have used the IUCEA 18-cell framework; in four of these reviews, the co-author chaired the external review teams. What is evident from these reviews is that although the recommendations highlighted critical areas of pedagogical changes required (for example, the need for use of innovative teaching methods and an increase of student engagement in the classroom), nobody from the unit under review or from the peer review team at any stage actually observed the teaching process. This underscores the argument that certain cells (for example, programme design; teaching and assessment methods; quality of academic staff; staff development activities) are more important than other cells (for example, facilities and infrastructure). This article next considers the evidence from the literature about what makes for good teaching and enhances student outcomes before returning to this argument about relative importance.

The initiative by the IUCEA is bringing about purposeful changes to quality enhancement in the region, as higher education institutions and external quality assurance agencies work as synergistic partners (Teferra & Mayer, 2015). The introduction of self-assessment has been an empowering enabler in efforts to enhance quality. However, many in the field have called for more emphasis on pedagogy and on the learning process (Leiber, 2019; King, 2018; Fexias & Euler, 2013; Randall *et al.*, 2013; Scott & Scott, 2013; Gibbs, 2010, 2012). The Association of American Colleges and Universities has in recent times developed the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project. The VALUE tool is a set of 16 rubrics that includes, for each of 16 common learning outcomes, guidance on how to judge student learning for various skills and abilities (AACU, 2019).

An analysis across the reviews of the 13 programmes (postgraduate programmes in medicine, undergraduate programme in nursing and postgraduate degrees in teacher education) consistently shows recommendations being focused on areas of teaching and learning. The recommendations included the need for more engaging pedagogical practices and issues around curriculum: from the need for definitions of programme learning outcomes that are competency-based to the need for alignment of these learning outcomes with course learning outcomes. This analysis highlighted the need for curriculum mapping, aligning of course learning outcomes with programme learning outcomes and curriculum alignment of assessment and teaching strategies to the stated learning outcomes to create significant learning experiences (Fink, 2013). Thus, it appeared that the 'process' cells in the framework held more 'weight' in the quality assurance model. The Higher Education Academy (UK), in the paper by Gibbs (2010) identified the dimensions of quality that have greatest impact on student learning outcomes. Gibbs' research on the dimensions of educational quality adapts Biggs's '3P' model (Biggs 1993) of 'presage', 'process' and 'product' to categorise the variables under consideration.

Presage variables define the context before students start learning; process variables describe what goes on as students learn; and product variables relate to the outcomes of that learning. For presage and process variables, the available evidence is examined concerning the validity of the variable: the extent to which it predicts student learning outcomes and educational gains. Each product variable is examined for its ability to indicate comparative quality. (Gibbs, 2010).

The nine quality dimensions that appear to have the most validity in predicting student learning outcomes and educational gains are identified (by Gibbs, 2010) as:

1. Quality of student intake (entry standards) is the best predictor of student educational outcomes.
2. Class size (and close contact with teaching staff but not class contact hours, nor, necessarily, low student to staff ratios).
3. Pedagogical practices that engender student engagement (participatory teaching methods; collaborative learning; extent and quality of student teacher interactions; level of academic challenge).
4. Quality of teaching staff (and whether they have a teaching qualification). The fewer part-time teaching staff the better! Student course and teaching staff evaluations are reliable but these only improve quality if there are built in ways to act upon.
5. Quantity and quality of feedback to students and clear expectations on goals, standards and assessments (rubrics) that promote 'deep' rather than 'surface' learning approaches. Formative assessment: more, better and faster feedback on student work.

6. Total student effort (class contact hours plus independent student study hours).
7. Funding allocation: spent on development of teaching staff, teaching and learning centres and academic support targeted to weaker students and those with special needs, for example, English language, counselling, study skills development (but not total institutional funding).
8. Existence of an undergraduate research opportunity scheme but not the strength of the institution's research.
9. Whether teaching is valued, rewarded, supported and funded and opportunities exist for peer engagement for teacher improvement.

Gibbs (2010) further highlights the synergies of these factors with the seven principles of good teaching practice of undergraduate education established by Chickering and Gamson (1987).

Good teaching practice includes a focus, for students and teaching staff alike, that:

- encourages contact between students and academic teaching staff;
- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
- encourages active learning;
- gives prompt feedback;
- emphasises time spent on study and time management;
- communicates high expectations;
- respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Reflection on the IUCEA quality assurance framework, as well as the evidence of what makes for meaningful learning through teaching that 'engenders student engagement', prompted a comparative analysis of the evidence as outlined above with the various cells of the IUCEA internal quality assurance framework. Each dimension of quality that is validated against student outcomes (Gibbs, 2010) was mapped against the criteria of the various cells of the framework from the IUCEA (2010) (Table 1). This comparison reveals that the IUCEA framework, which identifies and thereby treats 18 criteria or 'cells' equally, as already noted above, does not focus enough on authentication or recognition of teaching practice and the support for educational development of teaching staff. Certain cells only partly cover aspects known to be important to learning such as assessing student effort; the reward and recognition of teaching, or indeed teaching qualifications; and the depth of formative assessment and feedback.

Even where a cell can be identified, its focus is other than what Gibbs (2010) is stressing (Table 1); only for 'quality of student intake' is there a good match. Yet the support for teaching and teachers' practice is critical as a quality enhancement mechanism and building a quality culture (Houston & Hood, 2017). The

Table 1. Limitations in the evidence base of the IUCEA internal quality assurance framework

Higher Education Academy (UK), (Gibbs, 2010)	IUCEA Cells
Quality of student intake	Covered in Cell 10
Class size	Missing in the framework
Pedagogical practices that engender student engagement	Covered in Cell 6
Quality of teaching (academic teaching staff)	Cell 8 refers more to the educational qualification of faculty rather than any teaching qualification held.
Quantity and quality of feedback	Cell 7 partly covered
Total student effort	Cell 5 partly covered
Funding allocation	Cell 11 partly covered
Existence of an undergraduate research opportunity scheme	Cell 4 partly covered
Whether teaching is valued, rewarded, supported and funded	Cell 15 partly covered

IUCEA framework borrows heavily from, German and European processes of assessing the quality of academic programmes. These are similar to standard practice in internal quality assurance in higher education in the UK, Canada, Australia and adopted increasingly in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. It may therefore be extrapolated that the limitations of the IUCEA framework can be paralleled elsewhere.

Surprisingly little of the work done on teaching excellence has found its ways into actual practice, (Harvey, 2009; Gunn & Fisk, 2014) and is not reflected in programme quality frameworks. While the title of the new United Kingdom assessment process, *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework* (or TEF), seems to promise an enlightened focus, the implementation in 2018 (King, 2018) was critiqued not just for the use of the categorisation of gold, silver and bronze awards. The traditional, readily-available and hence ‘easy to measure’ metrics by which teaching quality is assessed in the UK are the employment record of graduates, scores on the National Student Surveys, and student continuation rates! The last of the three metrics could be useful if one could control the measurement by integrating entering grades so that continuation or retention does not become simply a direct result of selection but there is little evidence that such thinking has been entertained apart from some attempts to measure value-added, that have mostly fallen by the wayside (Yorke, 1995).

These metrics, as communicated, are very obviously not measures of ‘teaching excellence’, and much less so the latest proposed addition: to assess and perhaps even to fund departments on the basis of the earnings of their graduates (Collini 2018, pp. 162–64).

The work led by Kuh on high-impact practices (under the aegis of the Association of American Colleges and Universities) offers a menu of educational practices that have been shown to enhance student engagement and learning as well as increase rates of student retention (Kuh, 2008). The essence of that work can be found in the National Survey of Student Engagement, which Kuh founded at the start of the century. In 2017, over 700 US and Canadian

universities and colleges collected information on the participation of their first-year and final-year students, and the NSSE website claims that 'the results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college or university' (NSSE, 2019).

The work of scholars like Chickering and Gamson, Gibbs and Kuh illustrates what is desirable in reshaping quality assurance frameworks to place teaching and learning at the centre of the process of the assessment of quality. It is far from clear that many of the elements now conventionally assessed in internal quality assurance procedures have a significant influence on student learning; their inclusion has culminated in the creation of administratively cumbersome procedures that measure a lot of things that may or not tell us much about the quality of an educational programme. In short, there is a need to simplify most internal quality assurance procedures so that they focus on what the scholarship of academic development identifies as leading to improved delivery of programmes.

Conclusion and a way forward

It has generally been recognised that internal quality assurance frameworks have not been successful in winning buy-in from academic staff members or in encouraging improvement in teaching practices. The comparisons drawn in this paper between the evidence of what makes for quality student learning and the comprehensive foci of current quality assurance frameworks show that in many cases internal quality assurance and external quality assurance processes are not adequately enabling universities and their staff and students to enhance their teaching and learning. In the next decade, external quality assurance agencies and internal quality assurance mechanisms need to adopt the evidence of what affects the quality of the student learning experience. Further, in developing contexts such as East Africa where internal quality assurance is a concept relatively new to the higher education sector, the need for quality frameworks that assess the quality of teaching is urgent, within the context of widening participation and an increasing reliance on online and distance education. Quality assurance agencies should consider developing internal quality assurance frameworks for programme review in higher education that identify key areas that research shows make a difference to student engagement in learning as well methods required to assess teaching practices that are effective. This development will be critical to ensure that the quality assurance agenda over the next 25 years for higher education drives real improvements in the student learning experience and leads to a graduate who has the competencies required to cope with an ever-changing world in this third millennium (Gibbs, 2012).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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