

Developing internal QA mechanisms - Towards an East African Quality Assurance framework

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Abstract

The expansion of higher education in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda) while contributing to national, regional and global development goals has raised concerns over the issue of quality. To address this, the national regulatory agencies of Kenya (CHE, Tanzania (TCU) and Uganda (NCHE) in collaboration with the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the University of Oldenburg have started a collaboration to develop and pilot an East African QA framework. To this end a handbook including a diagnostic model for internal QA and external assessment was prepared and piloted in 22 selected institutions in the region. Additionally, staff of those institutions was selected and underwent training as quality assurance officers. Preliminary results, successes and challenges are identified and discussed.

Key words: internal QA, Africa, regional QA framework, capacity building/training, international co-operation

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Abstract: The expansion of higher education in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda) in particular while contributing to national, regional and global development goals has raised concerns over the issue of quality. To address this, the national regulatory agencies of Kenya (CHE, Tanzania (TCU) and Uganda (NCHE) in collaboration with the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the

German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the University of Oldenburg have started a collaboration to develop and pilot an East African QA framework. To this end a handbook including a diagnostic model for internal QA and external assessment was prepared and piloted in 22 selected institutions in the region. Additionally, staff of those institutions was selected and underwent training as quality assurance officers. Preliminary results, successes and challenges are identified and discussed.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the European and the East African setting in introducing internal QA mechanisms in HEIs?
2. How can co-operation between Europe and East Africa in higher education be strengthened?
3. Which good practices have been identified and what can be learned from them?
4. Which challenges have arisen and how can they be overcome to ensure sustainability?
5. How can the internal QA mechanisms be streamlined leading to quality enhancement and at the same time be aligned with external QA mechanisms in the countries?

Background and Rationale

Africa has different systems of education that may be based on national, colonial and other legacies, thus hampering the possibility for mutual recognition of different forms of educational certification and awards offered in different African countries. This limits mobility of students and trained human resources across the African continent. The African Union (AU) is committed to address this challenge as part of implementation of the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015) [1-3]. The Second Decade of Education for Africa envisages harmonizing higher education programmes in Africa so as to foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonization of procedures and policies in higher education, and attainment of comparability of qualifications. The envisaged key results areas include development and maintenance of a continental framework for higher education qualifications by establishing harmonized regional higher education processes, which are integrated into a common continental system. This approach augurs well with the initiative by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) in collaboration with the higher education regulatory agencies in the three East African countries (the Commission for Higher Education – CHE in Kenya, the Tanzania Commission for Universities – TCU, and the National Council for Higher Education – NCHE in Uganda), to introduce an East African quality assurance system.

Furthermore, higher education in Africa – just like elsewhere in the world – has witnessed a rapid expansion in the last 10 years. This is due to an increased public investment, establishment of public higher education institutions and socio-economic reforms allowing public-private partnership in higher education investment, which has led to a proliferation of higher education providers through establishment of private universities. While this expansion has led to an increased access, the quality of the education provided by the existing and newly established higher education institutions has continued to raise serious concern. Also of concern is the need to ensure higher education in Africa measures up to acceptable international standards, embracing comparability and compatibility of curricula regionally as well as internationally, in a bid to promote cross border education within and beyond the African continent. Such drive is also expected to address the need for labour mobility for Africa's graduates, within the continent and beyond.

The higher education regulatory agencies in the three East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) are mandated to oversee the establishment and management of quality higher education institutions in the region through national quality assurance systems. The agencies, which are publicly financed, also advise their respective governments on higher education matters and carry out reviews and accreditation of new institutions as well as programmes. National guidelines and criteria have been developed in all three countries [4-6], including a number of quantitative indicators (space, rooms, facilities etc) as well as indicators covering the curriculum and the qualifications of the teaching staff.

In order to harmonize and streamline accreditation and quality assurance procedures in the three East African countries, the regulatory agencies signed a Protocol of Understanding in July 2006. The Protocol formalizes inter-agency collaboration in all matters related to the promotion of the management of higher education quality in the region. This has enabled the regulatory agencies to work closely together in all matters related to maintaining appropriate higher education quality in the region. Furthermore, the regulatory agencies work closely with universities within the framework of the IUCEA, which draws membership from both public and private but state-recognized HEI's in the three East African countries as well as the regulatory agencies. The three countries share a common history, having existed as a common socio-economic block for quite a long time and hence the region has continued to exist as a unique higher education area. The countries exist within a legal entity of the East African Community (EAC) that was first formed in 1967 and lasted up to 1977 when it broke up. The Community was re-established in 2000 and higher education is one of the identified services in the cooperation agreement. With the recent admission of Rwanda and Burundi as full members of the Community and of the IUCEA, the combined population in the EAC region is at about 100 million people, and considering the current pace, the number of HEI's in East Africa is expected to drastically increase in the near future.

The three higher education regulatory agencies in collaboration with the IUCEA and universities in the individual countries are committed to strengthening the East Africa higher education area through the promotion and facilitation of student mobility, credit accumulation and transfer, and the exchange and sharing of information, academic staff and researchers. Furthermore, the higher education regulatory agencies and universities in East Africa are committed to assuring higher education quality in the region, through establishment of common quality benchmarks, indicators and outcomes. Within this context, the three East African member states also aspire to achieve a gross higher education enrollment ratio of 25-30% by the year 2025. Furthermore, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania identify expanded access to quality higher education as an important input in implementing various policy frameworks that address poverty reduction (the National Programme for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction – MKUKUTA in Tanzania, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan – PEAP in Uganda, and the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation in Kenya), socio-economic developmental targets (Vision 2030 in Kenya, and Vision 2025 in Uganda and Tanzania respectively), and attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

Apart from the external QA processes which have already gained a certain institutionalisation in the national systems, the HEIs carry out internal QA practices, though so far such practices are less structured and differ between the institutions and the countries, notwithstanding the fact that there is a common history in terms of the establishment of higher education in the region and that there are many communalities between the educational systems.

In 2006 the IUCEA Governing Board decided to introduce a common quality assurance system for universities in East Africa in order to promote harmonization and comparability of the quality of higher education in the region and also to protect the integrity of East Africa as

a credible higher education area. Therefore, in 2007 the IUCEA together with the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Rectors' Conference and the University of Oldenburg in Germany initiated a project to align internal QA mechanisms in the East African HEIs by two action lines, namely the development of a handbook on quality assurance for the East African region providing a common framework for QA in the region and by conducting a pilot of the developed methodology with a group of selected institutions from the region. This project is supported financially by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). This article gives a summary of that process.

Methodology

In order to promote stakeholder awareness and hence ensure acceptability of the QA system to be introduced, initially the IUCEA organized consultative engagement with senior government officials from the three East African countries, as well as vice chancellors, chief executive officers of the higher education regulatory agencies and some senior academics. The consultative process came up with the idea to develop a handbook containing QA instruments to be used in the region. The handbook entitled "*A road map to quality*" was developed by an external consultant from The Netherlands supported by a group of experts from East Africa and the IUCEA Standing Committee on Quality Assurance. The handbook comprises a number of several volumes covering different aspects of QA from programme to institutional level and from the internal and external QA perspective.

To test this handbook and the developed methodology, a group of 22 universities were selected (8 from Kenya, and 7 each from Tanzania and Uganda, see Annex) by the IUCEA. These universities had volunteered to participate in the pilot process and had internally appointed a QA-officer/coordinator/director. The QA personnel were trained for two weeks in Germany in September 2007. The training consisted of an introduction to the handbook, case studies from the University of Oldenburg and the University of Groningen in The Netherlands, as well as overarching information about the situation in Germany. Furthermore, input to QA processes from different stakeholders was presented. Additionally, the first part of the training included a session on how to deal with resistance to institutional reforms such as introduction of the QA system. In the end participants developed personal action plans indicating activities to be undertaken and timelines for the piloting process.

A model consisting of 22 indicators, ranging from learning outcomes to technical equipment, quality assurance methods employed at programme level to the qualifications of staff and students was used for the pilot self-assessment process. This was to be supplemented by a SWOT analysis as the final step of the self-evaluation process. To ease the process the programmes were to be selected from four broad fields of study: engineering, business, agriculture, and information technology. These fields were selected on the one hand because of their importance within the regional context. On the other hand the possibility of benchmarking between the involved institutions was envisioned to be bigger in those subject areas, which are – in terms of their academic and subject specific content standards – not necessarily very much bound to national boundaries (as opposed to many social sciences). Most of the programmes selected by the institutions were in the realm of business studies, followed on equal terms by IT and agriculture.

After the QA personnel returned to East Africa from the training in Germany, the three national regulatory agencies organised national workshops for the deans of those faculties where the pilots were to be conducted so as to ensure a smooth flow of information and a good implementation of the processes. A second training session was held in East Africa at

the end of January 2008. At this point progress reports were discussed and feedback was given. Furthermore, training was done on report writing and how to work with questionnaires and interviews in data collection. Additionally, the deans of the faculties where the pilots were located were invited for a one day seminar. A high-level forum involving the Tanzanian minister for higher education, science and technology, was organised for the deputy vice-chancellors responsible for academic affairs from the participating institutions.

As a side activity, before the above events took place monitoring visits were conducted at all but one of the participating HEIs in Tanzania. During the seminar it became evident that some of the indicators used in the self-assessment would need further discussion. The notion of learning outcomes and their relation to QA processes posed a challenge for most institutions. It was decided that national workshops should be held in April 2008 to provide further feedback on the reports and discuss some issues stemming from the progress achieved. These workshops took place in Kenya and Tanzania in early April 2008, after which monitoring visits were conducted at some of the participating Kenyan HEIs, with the remaining being planned for July 2008. In Uganda, monitoring visits to the participating institutions took place in April 2008, and the workshop was to be organised at a later point in time.

Then the third training session was held in July 2008, comprising a detailed feedback of the self-assessment reports as well as training session on learning outcomes, and discussion about revisions to the developed methodology already underway as informed by the status of the pilots so far. It was also decided that to streamline the internal QA processes in the East African region and to make them a regular activity of the institutions a second cohort of institutions was to be selected for a second round of the training activities and piloting. Furthermore, training for external peers is planned for November 2008, with participants including some peers from Europe as resource people. This will involve pilot peer review visits as part of the training activity. From thereon external peer reviews of the pilot programmes will be conducted. A final training workshop for the first pilot group of QA personnel is to be organized in January 2009, in order to discuss the results of the external assessment and consequences to be drawn from that process, in terms of target agreements and enhancement oriented activities. That training workshop will also include participants of the second cohort of QA personnel, in order to exchange experiences with the first group.

The IUCEA and the national regulatory agencies have been taking more and more responsibility during the course of the project, especially with regards to the recruitment of peers and the maintenance of a database and the respective organisation of the peer review activities to take place in the future. To further ensure sustainability of the process, participants of the first cohort of QA personnel will increasingly be used as trainers for successive exercises, both within the framework of the current project and national and regional contexts.

Results and Discussion

The pilot projects have been carried out successfully in the participating institutions. Great interest in the activities has been evident and the support of the national regulatory agencies as well as HEI management (VCs, DVCs, Deans) has been crucial to ensure smooth implementation of the process. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the majority of the institutions has for the first time carried out such a comprehensive internal self assessment activity of its programmes. This has been seen as extremely helpful by the institutions to identify areas for improvement as well as already existing strong practices. It has also become evident that in the majority of the institutions a number of QA practices are already in place and are part of the regular activities, but that so far these are not part of a structured approach.

Most institutions are thus planning the development of such a structured approach and a general policy on quality assurance as well as the introduction of a respective office/bureau to support the development of a comprehensive IQA system and to support the faculties in their QA activities for the very near future. Similarly, the IUCEA is in the process of establishing a unit to coordinate the regional QA system being introduced.

The management of the HEIs has unanimously and independently of each other provided feedback which indicates the usefulness of the IQA activities for management decisions (including budget allocation) and further improvement of the academic performance of the programmes. The institutions plan to streamline the approach internally to other faculties and programmes, using the participants from the pilot project as internal trainers within the respective institutions. Some universities are also using experiences from the pilot self-assessment in carrying out the on-going curriculum review processes.

At a regional level the project facilitates the regional integration process of the higher education systems in East Africa. It has contributed to a regional integration process in higher education similar to the Bologna Process. This process is complemented by another project of the IUCEA and the national regulatory agencies, with the goal of developing a credit transfer and accumulation system for the region.

However, there have also been challenges in running of the pilots. The timeline for the initial project was very tense given the fact that for most institutions the activity as well as the approach used was completely and utterly new and so far unfamiliar. Furthermore, gaps in data have been found for some of the indicators, for example exact drop out and completion rates. These are largely due to deficiencies in the internal documentation and data analysis processes.

On the content level, as already discussed above the notion and the use of learning outcomes has been a challenge for most institutions and programmes. While participants are used to prepare programme objectives, these are so far predominantly expressed in terms of teaching intentions and input categories as opposed to student learning outcomes in terms of skills, competencies and attitudes. This issue is continuously addressed within the project framework. Last but not least it has been a challenge for some institutions to receive feedback from stakeholders, especially employers and to work with students as members of the internal self-assessment committees. For those institutions which successfully included one or both groups in the exercise, feedback so far has indicated that the involvement of stakeholders has been perceived as extremely helpful, as insights were given that would not necessarily arise within a group of professors, lecturers and researchers alone.

Conclusion

It is indeed quite striking (or maybe not?) that the issues identified as challenges in the process of the pilot evaluations are very similar to those encountered by many universities in Europe when they engage on the journey towards an internal quality assurance system. This fact as well as the smooth implementation and the positive feedback for the project so far provides hope that further development of an East African approach to QA will on the one hand take regional specificities into account and will on the other hand be very compatible with practices in many other parts of the world, including a strong orientation and reference towards the European Standards and Guidelines. A further sustainable implementation of the IQA systems into East African higher education should thus also be conducive to increased

competitiveness of higher education in the region as well as its compatibility with the European Higher Education Area, facilitating the exchange of staff and students as well as long-term university partnerships in a mutually beneficial way.

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6. Quality Assurance and Accreditation System for Institutions and Programmes of Higher Education, Tanzania Commission for Universities

Annex

List of participating institutions by country

Kenya

Kenyatta University
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology
Maseno University
Egerton University
United States International University
Daystar University
Kenya Methodist University

Uganda

Makerere University
Gulu University
Mbarara University
Busoga University
Islamic University in Uganda
Bugema University
Nkumba University

Tanzania

University of Dar es Salaam
Sokoine University of Agriculture
Mzumbe University
Ardhi University

Open University of Tanzania
St. Augustine University of Tanzania
Tumaini University