

Higher Education Studies and Quality Assurance in African Universities

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Abstract

Quality assurance is an emerging area in higher education in Africa and its implementation could be enhanced through capacity building of institutional managers and quality assurance practitioners. One way of building capacity is through studying higher education as a discipline. Once managers understand major higher education concepts and theories, implementation of quality assurance systems is more likely to improve, thereby enhancing the quality of academic provision on the continent.

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education has become a global phenomenon. Its growth is due to several factors such as massification of higher education (HE), competition, privatization, emergence of several modes of HE delivery, and an increase in cross-border education, which all resulted in deteriorating HE standards. As part of the global growth in QA, continental and global agencies have been set up. For example, European Union countries came together to establish the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG-QA) in 2005. More recently, in 2019, the African Union established the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (ASG-QA). The ASG-QA are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa. However, implementing the ASG-QA has slowed down due to limited QA capacity on the continent.

Higher Education Studies as an Anchor for Quality Assurance Standards

Successful implementation of the ASG-QA can be improved if HE managers are equipped with relevant concepts and theories presented in HE studies. This is important, given that the ASG-QA are premised on such concepts and theories. A close analysis shows that nearly all the 13 ASG-QA are aligned to major courses which are taught in HE studies, including leadership and management; financial management; teaching and learning; program and curriculum design; and strategic planning and management. These courses are important anchors of quality assurance in HE. It is therefore important that HE administrators be exposed to HE education studies in order to enhance the implementation of the ASG-QA, either through formal education or through in-house training (given the limited number of institutions offering HE studies as a discipline in Africa).

Limited Opportunities to Study Higher Education in Africa

While the study of HE can enhance the implementation of the ASG-QA, opportunities to study HE in African universities are limited. In 2014, Laura Rumbley and her colleagues at Boston College's Center for International Higher Education carried out a research study on the worldwide offer of HE studies programs and research centers of HE. Their findings showed that the United States had the largest number of HE research centers (50), followed by China with 45, the United Kingdom with 18, and Japan with 11. Germany, Canada, and Australia follow, with eight, seven, and five, respectively. Africa was home to only six, or 3 percent, of the world's HE research centers.

In Africa, only a few universities (such as the University of KwaZulu Natal and the University of Cape Town in South Africa and Makerere University in Uganda) offer academic degrees in HE up to the PhD level. This trend only started recently, with the support of development partners. Expanding the study of HE could greatly enhance the capacity of managers to implement QA in African universities.

Relevant Higher Education Courses for QA

A number of courses have a high potential to enhance the implementation of the ASG-QA, as listed below.

- *Strategic planning and management:* Most higher education studies (HES) programs include strategic planning and management. This course explores the nature of strategies and strategic decision-making in colleges and universities. It also examines the

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strategic planning process starting with environmental scanning; an analysis of institutional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; identifying strategic issues; and strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. This course provides useful background information on the ASG-QA Standard 1, which is strategy, vision, and mission. Background information related to Standard 1 helps translate strategic objectives into clear strategic plans and policies. A basic understanding of strategic planning also helps integrate strategic planning and QA, which is currently receiving serious attention in quality management HE.

- *Curriculum and program development*: This is an important QA area related to Standard 7 of the ASG-QA, which is defined as “design, approval, monitoring and evaluation of study programs.” Under this standard, an institution should have policies and procedures for introducing new programs. Programs are also expected to have learning outcomes that are competence based. Procedures for amending or phasing out programs should be clear. In-depth understanding of program design and development would therefore contribute useful knowledge and skills to executing QA standards and guidelines under Standard 7. Such guidelines could be better understood by studying curriculum and program development in a HES program. The common course content explores theories, practices, and research related to curriculum in HE course and program planning, development, and implementation; teaching and assessment; student learning; and curricular innovation and curricular change. In addition, this course usually covers measurement and evaluation. Students are exposed to various assessment techniques (including development and validation of these techniques) to improve teaching and learning. Key terms used in measurement and evaluation, such as validity, reliability, and usability are discussed. Principles of test construction, administration, and scoring, as well as item analysis, are also covered.
- *Teaching and learning*: Teaching and learning is a common course that is often covered in HES programs. Its content examines a variety of effective teaching and learning strategies premised on educational theory and practice. Generic content for this course includes: principles of effective teaching and teaching preparation; understanding effective learning styles and strategies; instructional approaches and lesson planning; microteaching methodologies; assessment strategies; and peer teaching, peer evaluation of teaching, and teaching environment in the twenty-first century. Understanding these aspects is critical to effectively implement ASG-QA Standard 8 on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.
- *Financial management*: Effective financial management is the cornerstone of successful university management. Even when an institution successfully mobilizes large amounts of financial resources, not much can be achieved without putting in place cost-effective financial management strategies. Effective financial management is considered a critical facet of quality management in university administration. In this regard, universities are now urged to implement international QA financial management standards such as Standard 4 of the ASG-QA. It is therefore important that HE managers familiarize themselves with theoretical aspects of financial management in HE. As costs escalate and resources dwindle, effective, ethical, and socially responsible management of financial resources becomes an increasingly important skill in tertiary institutions. Hence, a HES financial management course explores financial issues specific to HE such as budgeting and budget management, resource allocation, asset management, government appropriations, financial planning, and fundraising. These topics would ensure quality management of financial resources characterized by effective strategies with respect to revenue management, internal controls, debt management, risk management, assets management, and procurement management.

Conclusion

It is important that HE managers in general, and QA practitioners in particular, undergo a basic training in HE studies to enhance their conceptual understanding of HE concepts and principles, which are critical to enhance the implementation of QA in HEIs. African universities should urgently pay attention to the study of HE, which remains the Achilles’ heel of education on the continent. ▲

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