

Who Guards the Guard? The Need for Meta-Evaluation of Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies in Namibia

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Abstract

Meta-evaluations by Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) aim to evaluate the quality of the evaluators of quality assurance. While such evaluations are the norm, especially in Europe, they are rare in Africa. A critical literature review was conducted to ascertain whether meta-evaluations were conducted in Namibia. The study established that such evaluations have yet to be practiced in the country. Drawing on Clark's model of the organisational analysis of higher education institutions and the higher education system as an analytical lens, and based on the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and some cases of meta-evaluations by QAAs, we argue for the need to conduct such evaluations in Namibia. The article provides an overview of QAAs' operations and functions, as well as the current external quality assurance system for higher education in Namibia and justifies the necessity of meta-evaluations in the Namibian context in order to enhance the capacity of QAAs and the quality of higher education institutions.

Key words: higher education, meta-evaluations, Namibia, quality assurance, quality assurance agencies

Les méta-évaluations conduites par les agences d'assurance de la qualité (QAA) visent à évaluer la qualité des évaluateurs d'assurance de la qualité. Ce type d'évaluations est normal, plus particulièrement en Europe; alors qu'en Afrique, il est rare. Un examen critique de la documentation a été effectué pour vérifier si des méta-évaluations ont été effectuées en

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Namibie. L'étude a établi que de telles évaluations n'ont pas encore été pratiquées dans le pays. Appuyés sur le modèle de Clark d'analyse organisationnelle des établissements d'enseignement supérieur et du système d'enseignement supérieur comme objectif analytique, et basés sur les normes et les lignes directrices africaines pour l'assurance de la qualité ainsi que sur certains cas de méta-évaluations effectuées par les QAA, nous soutenons la nécessité de procéder à de telles pratiques d'évaluation en Namibie. L'article donne un aperçu général des opérations et des fonctions des QAA, ainsi que du système externe actuel d'assurance de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur en Namibie et justifie la nécessité de la pratique de méta-évaluations dans le contexte namibien afin d'améliorer la capacité des QAA et la qualité des établissements d'enseignement supérieur.

Mots clés: enseignement supérieur, méta-évaluations, Namibie, assurance de la qualité, agences d'assurance de la qualité

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is susceptible to societal and global changes and in order to remain relevant and responsive, it needs to adapt to trends as they emerge. The main global trends in HE, namely, massification, diversification, privatisation and internationalisation, are expected to influence the sector's strategic choices in developing a Quality Assurance (QA) system (Bernhard, 2011). Quality assurance involves a considerable number of mechanisms and procedures that seek to ensure the desired quality in HE (Doutora, Especialista, Mestre and Doutora, 2014).

Despite the fact that QA has been employed in HE for many years, evaluation in Namibia has focused on the quality of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with little or no attention paid to evaluation of the quality of Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs). The latter is a relatively new trend that is referred to as meta-evaluation or evaluation of the evaluators.

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is the umbrella body of QAAs in this sector that is tasked with their evaluation. According to Doutora et al. (2014), the ENQA has been operating independently of Ministries of Education in Europe since 2004 and it represents a 'quality seal' to hold European QAAs accountable. The closest body to such an association in the African context is the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN), which was set up by the Association of African Universities (AAU) in 2007 to act as a regional umbrella organisation for QAAs and a platform for peer reviews (Okebukola, 2012). Given the importance accorded to meta-evaluations and the value that they may offer in enhancing the quality of national QAAs, we explored whether meta-evaluations had been adopted in the HE space in Namibia.

Methodology

The study sought to answer the following key questions: what does the literature say about the benefits of meta-evaluations? How are meta-evaluations currently being carried out in Namibia? What lessons can Namibia learn from international best practices of meta-evaluations? To answer these questions, we undertook a critical, in-depth analysis of the literature on the adoption of meta-evaluations as good practice in QA drawing on peer-reviewed journals and open sources web searches. The aim of the analysis was to determine the meta-evaluation processes carried out in HE at the international level, with a focus on Europe and Africa. It included interrogation of policies, processes, procedures and practices to determine what was known and what was not known at the time of the study, whether such practices were taking place in Namibia and what the country could learn from international best practices.

Analytical Framework

We adopted Burton Clark's (1970, 1972) model for the organisational analysis of HEIs and systems as an analytical framework. Central to this model are the concepts of knowledge, beliefs and authority. Clark examines how various interest groups, both within and outside the university, shape and subvert the management of change. The author notes the tensions within the university between the 'enterprise' and the 'discipline' and, at the system level, between the state authority, the market and the academic oligarchy. In considering the applicability of Clark's (1970, 1972) model to understand today's HE systems and institutions, it is possible to detect a weakening of boundaries both within HEIs and other societal institutions (Clark, 1970, 1972). Clark's model has much in common with a more recent analysis of the changing relationship between HE and stakeholders due to the pressures of the 21st century, for example internationalisation, massification and customer orientation (Badat, 2010). These pressures have triggered the introduction of both internal and external QA systems in HE, with the former being institutionally driven and the latter by QAAs. Considering Clark's concepts of knowledge, beliefs and authority, questions are being raised as to 'who evaluates the quality of the evaluators' (who legitimises their authority and knowledge to evaluate others?). It is now understood that QAAs must also undergo evaluations (meta-evaluations) to improve and strengthen their capacity to evaluate HEIs effectively. Clark's analytical tool helped to situate meta-evaluations with the tensions experienced within Namibian HE and guided our suggestions to strengthen the sector.

The Concept of Quality in Higher Education

There is no single definition of the concepts of quality and QA in HE. Mishra (2007) posits that one of the main reasons why quality and QA in HE are more complicated than in industry is the significant number of players in the HE field. Quality in HE means different things to different stakeholders, for example, academics, students, government, and employers. Harvey and Green (1993) offered the most comprehensive definition of quality, namely, quality as exceptional; transformational; perfection; fitness for purpose and value for money.

Quality as exceptional (excellence): This highlights quality as something that is distinctive and unattainable by many. However, it is incompatible with HE, which aims to transform aspects of elitism and promote access for all. According to Harvey and Knight (1996), exceptionality or excellence is of little value in HE, as exceptionality provides no obvious way of defining quality.

Quality as transformational: In this context, quality is defined as the change that would take place after provision of the service, for example the cognitive change that occurs in individuals as a result of certain processes such as evaluation of evaluators. This notion emphasises the enhancement of knowledge and skills, as well as the empowerment of individuals such as students. Synonymous with such cognitive change is the value addition of a process to which the individual/body in question has been subjected (Mhlanga, 2008).

Quality as perfection: This notion explains quality as flawless and standardised. It is applicable in industry where the products in question may be objects, such as manufacturing pens. All the pens can be manufactured to perfection, according to set standards. This is almost impossible in HE, which focuses on students as the product. Students who enter HE differ in terms of their backgrounds, circumstances, prior knowledge and understanding. All students enter and leave HE as unique beings. Thus, this dimension of quality is not always applicable to HE since it is not possible for any HEI to aim to produce identical or perfect graduates (Watty, 2003).

Quality as fitness for purpose: According to this notion, quality has no meaning other than in relation to the purpose of the product or service in question (Green, 1994). Conformity with the institutional mission as well as the capacity to meet customer requirements is the principal perspective underpinning this concept (Kahsay, 2012).

Quality as value for money: According to Harvey and Green (1993), value for money is seen as the return on investment, where the product or service provided is proportional to the money spent. However, Shawa (2008) asserts that, this concept fails when the system overemphasises measurable indicators that, in the majority of cases, do not hinge on quality learning.

The Concept of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance refers to an on-going process of evaluating the quality of, for example, a HE system, institutions or programmes (Martin and Stella, 2007). It is fulfilled by using agreed processes, procedures and criteria that are intended to ensure the existence of quality in the services provided. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) refers to the policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its purposes and meeting standards. External Quality Assurance (EQA), on the other hand, refers to the actions of an external body which assesses the operation of an institution or a programme in order to determine whether it is meeting the agreed standards (Martin and Stella, 2007).

Through Acts of Parliament, the Namibian government has established three QAAs, namely, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) and the Namibia Training Authority (NTA), as well as professional bodies.

The Namibian External Quality Assurance System

In most countries, responsibility for QA rests with a central agency responsible for coordinating HE, whether it is a ministry of education, a ministry of higher education, a university grants commission, or a specialised QAA, which is a sub-agency of the main HE body (Brennan and Shah, 2000; Barnett, 1994; Vroeijenstijn, 1995, in Hsu, 2017). Most national QAAs are responsible for conducting evaluations, establishing quality criteria, training peer assessors to conduct peer reviews, and publishing evaluative reports (Hsu, 2017). Some QAAs have what Finch (1997, p. 153) terms 'legitimate authority' to pursue their aims through legislation and funding (Hsu – Yu ping, 2017).

Namibia's HE system is relatively new, and the HE landscape is also relatively small, comprising two public HEIs, one private university, and a few private colleges. Globally, governments have adopted legislation to establish QAAs and give them the authority to ensure that HEIs are achieving what the government and/or society require of them (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). Namibian QAAs have overlapping functions stemming from the Acts, with serious implications for the implementation of EQA. This fragments the system, negatively affects QAAs' operations and creates negative perceptions among stakeholders (Kadhila and Iipumbu, 2019).

For example, HEIs are frustrated by the overlapping work of QAAs and lack confidence in their staff's capacity to conduct reviews and audits.

Internationally, multiple QAAs in a country have led to dissatisfaction (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1999; Woodhouse, 1995; Harvey, 1997; World Bank, 2010), as they impose unnecessary administrative burdens to comply with their requirements (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1999). As in Namibia, they tend to focus on fulfilling their overlapping mandates.

An independent QAA is a key element of a mature QA system (Brennan and Shah, 2000). According to Woodhouse (1999), a single agency offers advantages such as low total system costs; a consistent approach; no conflicting instructions, recommendations or directives; and a single relationship between the agency, the institution and other bodies (Woodhouse, 1999). We contend that in Namibia, the multiple QAA approach invites troubled power relations, and unnecessary duplication. Meta-evaluations of the country's QAAs could improve their operations by providing legitimate feedback, building capacity, creating knowledge and according them legitimate authority.

Quality assurance agencies undertake capacity building, accreditation and audits of HEIs and their programmes with the aim of impacting the HE system as a whole, through individual institutions. Knowledge, authority and beliefs are the foundational elements of these agencies that reinforce their legitimacy.

Although QA can be regarded as a tool for improvement, a question arises as to whether HE quality is really improving due to EQA processes such as accreditation, or whether it merely appears to improve. The World Bank (2010) points out that while EQA systems such as programme accreditation are common, they are often problematic in terms of their effectiveness and cost efficiency.

We argue that meta-evaluations in Namibia would boost stakeholders' confidence in their QAAs' respective operations. Given that the country's QAAs benefit the AfriQAN's capacity building workshops, we contend that the AfriQAN should strengthen its capacity building role to promote and capacitate QAAs to implement meta-evaluations in Namibia that enhance the quality of both internal and external QA processes.

International Perspectives on Meta-Evaluation

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) guides agencies at the international level and countries the world over, including Namibia, have subscribed to the network (Van Damme, 2002). By virtue of its membership, Namibia is able to adopt the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice together with the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA).

The evaluation of evaluating agencies was the main theme of the 1999 biennial conference of the INQAAHE in Chile and the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice for QA, which are critical in meta-evaluations, emerged from this conference (Martin, 2016). According to Szanto (2010, p. 23), "we are witnessing an interesting process of development of quality scrutiny schemes". We contend that Namibia should embark on the same journey of scrutinising quality schemes in a developmental approach to benefit its HE system.

The roles and functions of QAAs may differ according to their different mandates, even if they tend to overlap in certain functions. In the case of Namibia, QAAs also vary in terms of their status and place in the national QA system, in the division of labour in HE, in the QA of HE and in the environment of the students and external stakeholders in the evaluation processes (Blackstock et al., 2010). However, what is common among different QAAs are the QA approaches, i.e., accreditation, audit and assessment. According to Sanyal and Martin (2006), the strategic goals of a QAA include increasing stakeholders' confidence in the outcomes of HE; supporting the accreditation process; helping HEIs to establish IQA systems; enhancing capacity building in QA for accreditation; facilitating the development and application of relevant reference standards (benchmarks) for academic programmes; integrating a sustainable process that combines institutions; supporting continuing quality improvement; and cooperating with other accreditation agencies.

The above strategic goals are generic in nature as they are applicable to most, if not all, QAAs in HE, including in Namibia. In addition, QAAs are expected to extend these strategies beyond documents and theories, and embed them in their internal culture, which is fundamental to the meta-evaluation processes. The challenge confronting evaluators is how to verify that they are being followed without relying solely on the documentation provided that lists the different strategies and goals. They are required to consistently assess the practice of the strategies in different agencies taking into consideration contextual uniqueness. This also means that QAAs should ensure the quality of their own IQA mechanisms.

The ASG-QA and European Standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG-QA) state that the evaluation of a QAA should include policies and mechanisms for its IQA, which demonstrate on-going efforts to improve the quality and integrity of its activities, its response to contextual changes in the environment in which it operates and its links to the international community of QA (Martin, 2016). Ensuring that QAAs adhere to these standards is one way of addressing the strategic goals mentioned earlier (Sanyal and Martin, 2006). Only once QAAs have established such qualities internally will be able to carry out effective

EQA in HEIs. This should also boost stakeholders' confidence and trust. Meta-evaluations would help in assessing whether QAAs operate with transparency, integrity and professionalism; have mechanisms in place that enable them to periodically review and improve their own activities; and subject themselves to external reviews at regular intervals (Martin, 2016).

The INQAAHE Good Practices, which are similar to the ASG-QA and ESG-QA, provide an indication of what should be expected of QAAs in terms of the evaluation process and, ultimately, the nature of an agency's internal culture. While QAAs may have written documents containing the Guidelines of Good Practices, this does not necessarily mean that they practice such a culture. Meta-evaluations are the best tools with which to assess the existence of such a culture for improvement purposes.

Meta-Evaluation Lessons from Europe

The ESG-QA were adopted in Europe in 2005 (ENQA, 2005) as part of the Bologna Process. According to the ESG (and thereby the ENQA membership criteria), QAAs are expected to undergo an external review every five years. Standard 3.8 of the ESG (numbering according to the 2009 edition) states that QAAs should have procedures in place for their own accountability, while Guideline No. 3 under this standard suggests a mandatory, cyclical, external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years. A periodic external review helps the agency to reflect on its policies and activities while also providing the means to assure both the agency and its stakeholders that it is continuing to adhere to the principles enshrined in the ESG (ENQA, 2005). The ENQA is committed to continuously enhancing this process that is essential to strengthen mutual trust between agencies and HE stakeholders as well as among the agencies themselves (ENQA, 2005). This process is critical and essential for Namibia given the fragmented nature of its QA system.

It is clear from the above discussion that the ESG makes provision for QAAs in Europe to undergo meta-evaluations as a tool for both improvement and capacity strengthening. For example, when the Hungarian Agency for Accreditation (HAC) underwent a meta-evaluation exercise, the process confirmed that the findings could be proactively used to improve other agencies. Szanto (2010) notes that findings which may be common to QAAs include a greater focus on the output of programmes, a broader view of quality (not just academic content) and more focus on improvement. In line with Clark's (1970; 1972) view, broadening the focus of quality reviews would help to legitimise the HE QA system and perhaps solve some tensions within it.

Namibia, which at the time of the study had yet to implement meta-evaluations, should ensure that it incorporates some of these qualities in

its design of such evaluations. Upcoming (or newly established) agencies can also develop and contextualise their systems based on the experience of others without reinventing the wheel. What an agency does with the results of the review process is of the upmost importance. This includes the way in which it puts the outcomes of the review into practice by formulating and implementing an action plan for improvement (Szanto, 2010).

Meta-evaluations benefit QAAs in a manner similar to the way in which EQA benefits HEIs. Internal quality assurance is a determining factor of the quality of any institution. As such, the cultivation of a quality culture in QAAs should be non-negotiable and should be an integral aspect of the agency. Evaluations should focus on both the strengths and shortcomings of an agency. According to Szanto (2005), the final evaluation report should be short, explicit and critical, balancing the strengths and weaknesses of the agency evaluated and providing recommendations for quality enhancement (Szanto, 2005).

Purpose and power are two important dimensions of the QA processes. In terms of the purpose, it may be self-enlightening in order to enhance self-improvement or it may enlighten external stakeholders about what is happening in an institution (Mhlanga, 2008). In terms of the most debated purpose of QA, namely, accountability and improvement, the question arises as to which is which for meta-evaluations. In the case of traditional QA, it is argued that both (accountability and improvement) are necessary. It is hoped that meta-evaluations will be able to strike a balance between the two. Some authors are of the opinion that external evaluation of agencies is a powerful means of both assuring and enhancing the quality of QAAs' operations, thus ensuring both their improvement and accountability (Szanto, 2005).

Szanto (2010) refers to the effectiveness of enforcing moral behaviour, and the morality of the enforcers themselves. In political terms, this relates to where ultimate power should lie (Szanto, 2010). As Szanto puts it, "who should guard the guardians then? And how many guardian levels do we need?" (Szanto, 2010: 10). There are power dynamics in the QA system, such as whether the locus of power is internal to the institution, or whether it is located outside it. Such power is often defined by the reporting lines within the system (Mhlanga, 2008). Where, then, do the reporting lines of meta-evaluations lie? Are they with an outside agency or are they internal? The reporting lines reflect who is in control of the QA system as a whole, and to whom the university or agency is accountable in terms of its QA arrangements (Mhlanga, 2008). Power dynamics and control mechanisms often reveal the key driver of the QA system (Mhlanga, 2008). Power in this type of system is inevitable and usually rests in a few hands. However, what is important is the purpose the power is serving. For example, is it practiced

in such a way that it leans more towards accountability or improvement? Although a balance between accountability and improvement is logical, it has proven to be difficult to strike an effective balance.

It is important to ensure that QAAs are empowered through the process of meta-evaluation to achieve both accountability and improvement. Agencies will be empowered if their internal systems and procedures are improved as a result of meta-evaluations and if the evaluations are conducted in a collegial, rather than in a bureaucratic and managerial, manner. Agencies will be empowered if autonomy is respected, and the agency also respects HEIs' autonomy to empower these institutions and promote an effective internal culture. In turn, empowered agencies assist in capacity development of HEIs' QA systems and processes.

Meta-Evaluation Initiatives in Africa

Peer reviews of QAAs are a recent phenomenon and have been mainly inspired by the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which was launched in 2003 by the African Union (Okebukola, 2012). Peer reviews of existing QAAs would contribute to attainment of the goal of establishing a QA framework for Africa (Okebukola, 2012). Peer review is embedded in respect for the knowledge and skills of the reviewing partners as well as trust in their impartiality and ability to conduct the review objectively and in a transparent manner. In addition, it is driven by a quest for self-improvement through a critical outsider assessment and analysis (Okebukola, 2012). However, there is a paucity of evidence of this practice in Namibia, confirming the need for the country's QAAs to adopt it.

While the ASG-QA has outlined standards and guidelines that each QAA should strive to achieve, these are simply guidelines and not an exhaustive set of criteria for the evaluation of QAAs. The guidelines could thus be adapted to suit different contexts. Areas covered in the ASG-QA include legal status; vision and mission statement; governance and management; independence of the QAA; policies, processes and activities; internal QA; financial and human resources; benchmarking, networking and collaboration; and periodic reviews of QAAs (HAQAA, 2016).

There are slight differences between the ASG-QA and the ESG-QA. Namibia could benchmark with the ESG-QA to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of its QAAs. This could focus on the success of the meta-evaluations conducted in countries which made use of the ESG-QA with Namibia adopting best practices and learning from their experiences.

It is clear that meta-evaluations in HE offer benefits, including enhancing stakeholders' trust in the quality of QAAs' operations and services. In Namibia, it appears that it has been taken for granted that, although the IQA of HEIs must be quality assured, this is not necessary in the case of the

QAA evaluators. Szanto (2010) used Juvenal's (2018) words as an analogy to guide the quality of the guiders in HE QA – "I hear always the admonishment of my friends: 'Bolt her in, constrain her!' But who will guard the guardians? The wife plans ahead and begins with them!" (Szanto, 2010, p. 186). Guardians in this case refer to QAAs as they are 'guarding' the quality of HE by regularly evaluating the operations and standards of both these institutions and their programmes (Szanto, 2010). Blackstock et al. (2010) note that one might question if it is legitimate to ask whether or not QAAs, as experts on QA, have a quality culture, as quality procedures are not necessarily indicative of such a culture and, while these agencies examine the quality procedures of institutions, there is a paucity of evidence from the outsider's perspective on the IQA of the agencies themselves.

The Practice of Meta-Evaluation in Namibia

The main difference between the European and African practices is that, in Europe, meta-evaluations are compulsory, and are used for the accreditation of QAAs. Meta-evaluations in Africa are voluntary and do not lead to accreditation but are used to improve QAAs' internal capacity. It is important to note that unlike in Europe, there is no established body in Namibia similar to the ENQA to hold QAAs accountable. It is, therefore, not surprising that, despite the ASG-QA having made provision for meta-evaluations, implementation has been slow. As in many other African countries, we established that no meta-evaluations or peer evaluation mechanisms for QAAs had been conducted in Namibia. Given the pivotal role played by meta-evaluations, there is an urgent need to introduce such mechanisms in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the country's QAAs.

Doutora et al. (2014, p. 74) assert that, external QAAs need to acknowledge that "no one can give what one does not have, or that one can only give what one is, and has". This implies that if QAAs examine themselves and think about and evaluate their practices, they would be better able to understand and assist the institutions they evaluate. In line with Clark's (1970, 1972) model, this practice would be legitimised and used to enhance the quality of HEIs in Namibia which, indeed, is the main purpose of meta-evaluations, particularly of QAAs and entire HE systems. We thus argue that meta-evaluations of Namibia's HE sector are a matter of necessity. The major challenge that gave rise to the need for meta-evaluations is the debate in HE circles as to who assures the quality of QAAs, namely, the question of *quid custodiet ipsos custodiet?* (Who shall guard the guardians?) (Sanyal and Martin, 2006).

Namibia could also learn from the stringent European requirements in relation to meta-evaluations. For example, in order to become a member of the ENQA, a QA agency has to undergo evaluations. Furthermore, the

ESG-QA tends to address the question of meta-evaluations directly. It should also be noted that the ASG-QA has already factored in both the need for and the criteria for meta-evaluations in Africa in general. This could mean that, if properly applied, it could facilitate the implementation of meta-evaluations in Namibia.

The ASG-QA could support Namibia in the implementation of improved QA practices by guiding stakeholders on the application of standards and guidelines in HE, helping them to develop adequate IQA mechanisms that follow international best practices and assisting them to assess their own quality through self-assessment (HAQAA, 2016). Namibia (and Africa at large) is fortunate that meta-evaluations are promoted through the ASG-QA while mechanisms are set out to enable countries to implement them with ease. Thus, Namibia would not have to formulate meta-evaluation standards but could adapt the ASG-QA. The ESG's recommendation of cyclical internal and external evaluations of HE institutions and/or their programmes and periodic reviews of European QAAs, would equally be a practical process in the Namibian HE context.

Analysis and Discussion/Reflection

Quality assurance agencies' role is to safeguard the quality of HEIs and/or their programmes (Aelterman, 2006). In line with Clark's (1970, 1972) model, the main tasks of a QAA are to determine its understanding of what quality is and how it may be defined, the stakeholders to be consulted, the way in which international standards and definitions will be taken into account, and how to legitimise and make meta-evaluations acceptable throughout the system (Martin and Stella, 2007). This points to the importance of clarifying concepts and clear working definitions. For example, in assessing quality, it should be clear to both the evaluators and the 'evaluatees' what is meant by quality. Once the definition has been formulated, it is important that evaluators share a common understanding if they are to carry out evaluations with consistency. In addition, because quality is defined differently by different stakeholders, it is important that an agency, or even an HEI, understands its stakeholders, especially in relation to conceptualisation of the concept of quality. Furthermore, it is important that working concepts and processes be defined for a particular context, for example quality and QA in the context of meta-evaluations of QAAs in HE.

In European countries, meta-evaluations proved their worth through the change that occurred in the evaluated QAAs, the depth of that change, and the value added in terms of institutional behaviour and organisation (Brennan and Shah, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Morley, 2004; Stensaker, 2008). As noted, our assumption is that the implementation of meta-evaluations in Namibia would likely improve QAAs' operations and policies.

By extension, this has the potential to influence change within universities at institutional level through university policies, as well as organisational structures and by having a direct impact on academics and administrators (Rosa and Teixeira, 2014; Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007).

As noted previously, strong stakeholder involvement is a typical feature of European QA. The revisions to the ESG (ENQA, ESU, EUA et al., 2014) show that the focus on meaningful engagement of stakeholders has grown in importance over the years. Namibia should also ensure that its system builds stakeholder confidence in the HE system. Quality assurance agencies are more likely to gain respect for their work across different stakeholders in the system if their knowledge on the expected elements has been evaluated and found to meet the expected standards. The issue of authority can be examined from a knowledge point of view. With legitimate authority, QAAs can claim custodianship of the EQA knowledge required to carry out QA in the system. According to Harvey (2007), a quality culture is primarily about stakeholders' behaviour rather than the operation of a quality system.

We argue that QAAs should demonstrate the capacity to perform their work in order to boost stakeholders' trust and confidence that QA will achieve the desired outcome. Meta-evaluations would positively impact the knowledge and authority of QAAs by placing the custodians of EQA under the microscope.

Drawing on Clark's understanding of the concepts of knowledge, beliefs and authority in relation to tensions in HE, we contend that meta-evaluations are necessary to strengthen stakeholders' trust and confidence. This implies that instead of QAAs focusing only on the evaluation of HE institutions, they themselves should be quality assured. However, as noted previously, at the time of the study, this was not common practice in Africa, despite the ASG-QA which was relatively new.

For any system to be effective, those responsible for facilitating the process require knowledge and authority, as well as resources. Quality assurance in Namibia needs to fulfil these requirements if the system is to impact change in HE as the concerns form important lessons for reviewers, QAAs and the entire stakeholder community. The fact that the Hungarian Agency for Accreditation did not have the power to implement the recommendations arising from the meta-evaluation exercise says much about the power and autonomy required in the QAA context. In line with Clark's model, it is important to legitimise meta-evaluations and bestow authority through the establishment of proper mechanisms. Such power should be vested depending on the agency's roles, responsibilities and mandate. In addition, the agency should be given space in which to improve itself. This is a critical lesson for national governments and establishing bodies.

Limited powers may lead to a lack of autonomy to implement improvement measures initiated by the agency. Furthermore, the reviewers should agree on and be consistent in relation to compliance issues. Communication between a QAA and its stakeholders is crucial. Stakeholders should be entitled to see the review report as this is one of the ways in which they remain informed of the QAA's quality status. Finally, the agency should formulate its improvement or action plan based on the review report. Failure to ensure that these conditions are met could render meta-evaluations worthless.

The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA) cited the following three important outcomes resulting from meta-evaluation processes: (i) learning about one's own organisation in a thorough manner, (ii) creating a new methodology for internal work and horizontal sharing of information, and (iii) generating awareness of the agency's weaknesses and the types of problems which emerge through its work as well as being cognisant of its strengths (Costes et al., 2010). Effective outcomes and, perhaps, the impact of the review process will depend on the reviewers and their knowledge, experience and attitude. Review panels should include members with a variety of personal experience and backgrounds. It is also important that each panel includes at least one expert who is knowledgeable about the HE system, and the culture and language of the country in question (Costes et al., 2010). Without an able panel, the process could be meaningless or worthless, as the usefulness of the outcomes of meta-evaluations also depends on the status and experience of the agency. The process should also take into consideration the purpose of the review, including what is to be reviewed (Mhlanga, 2008).

Namibia could also learn from Europe by establishing a body similar to the ENQA. A single body that holds agencies accountable for their IQA is critical to instituting and ensuring successful meta-evaluations. The real challenge for QAAs and other stakeholders is to demonstrate the impacts of different QA methods. According to the ENCA report (ENQA, 2015; EUA, 2013) agencies that seek to measure or analyse the impact of their activities need to address several fundamental questions, such as for whom EQA should produce impacts (HEIs, management, lecturers, students, the labour market...), and whether there should be an observable direct causal relationship between EQA and the quality of teaching and learning, or rather between EQA and IQA processes (ENQA, 2015). The ENQA (2015) shows that through peer review evaluations, i.e., meta-evaluations, QAAs collect a wealth of information and feedback from the HEIs and programmes reviewed, stakeholders, and review panels; which helps these agencies to improve their processes and practices, and ultimately be effective in enhancing quality HE provision.

The Need for Meta-Evaluation in Namibia

As noted, despite African peer review of QA, there was no indication that Namibia had adapted this practice at the time of the study. Meta-evaluations or the evaluation of QAAs is justified by the need to change stakeholders' attitudes towards EQA, and to achieve harmonisation, and comparable standards between QAAs, ultimately improving the quality of HE systems at large. Comparability of standards is critical to HE, particularly in relation to the processes of internationalisation and globalisation. The current shared objective of the EQA community appears to be building trust among the various actors in the system (Costes et al., 2010).

Previous studies, particularly in Europe, show that multi-stage evaluation procedures (including meta-evaluations) have proved reliable and have gained acceptance (Bornmann, Mittag and Daniel, 2006). Firstly, they have encouraged QAAs – and through them HEIs – to align their procedures with the common European standards. Secondly, meta-evaluations as peer reviews have supported the creation of trust between and amongst different QA systems across Europe.

According to Van Damme (2002), meta-accreditation is not unknown in the field of QA. For example, the German system that was introduced in 1998 is based on this principle. The Akkreditierungsrat, a body created jointly by the public authorities and the HE community, has the power to evaluate and accredit agencies operating in the accreditation of new Bachelor's and Master's programmes. Van Damme (2002, p. 15) contends that:

Meta-accreditation can be a very powerful tool at the international level as well. A kind of recognition procedure, based on the evaluation of quality assurance and accreditation agencies on agreed standards in the professional community, would produce a multilateral recognition of agencies. In turn, this would give programmes, institutions, students, employers and the general public the reassurance that assessment by such an agency is done on the basis of internationally recognised standards. Trust in the quality of quality assurance and accreditation systems would also give a very powerful incentive for significant progress in the field of recognition of qualifications (Van Damme, 2002).

The potential benefits of meta-evaluations for different stakeholders at various levels thus include internationally recognised standards, further indicating an external review serves internal as well as external purposes. However, this process could raise the challenges identified by Clark as the intersections of knowledge, beliefs and authority can cause tension at different levels in the HE system. Reviews may be carried out with a view to enhancing the operations of the agency and/or the national system (Costes et al., 2010). It is important that the agency perceives the entire

process as both an opportunity and a challenge in relation to its own development and quality improvement, rather than simply to meet external requirements (Costes et al., 2010). Substantial compliance, as opposed to rigid adherence, is essential (Costes et al., 2010). However, these arguments give rise to the old debate on the purpose of QA. If accountability is the purpose of meta-evaluations, it may be inevitable that QAAs (as HEIs) will fall into the compliance trap of fulfilling external requirements. Who is behind the meta-evaluations? For whom are they being conducted? Who sets the criteria? All these aspects determine the purpose and therefore QAAs' response. In encouraging Africa to adopt this process, these questions, in addition to the ASG-QA, will be critical in designing a meta-evaluation system that ensures that the overarching aim of improvement is achieved.

On the other hand, we argue that meta-evaluations for the purpose of enhancing IQA (as opposed to accountability) will most likely serve the purpose of improvement. Namibian QAAs would be required to enhance IQA as part of the meta-evaluation process. The ASG-QA highlights the importance of a strong internal culture. A strong internal quality culture may be a sound indicator of quality; however, the question arises as to the reason why a strong internal culture is critical for Namibia. It is important that where a strong internal culture exists, EQA also becomes effortlessly successful.

Conclusion

Drawing on Clark's understanding of the various intersections of knowledge, beliefs and authority that bring about tensions in HE, we have argued that meta-evaluations, if carried out according to standards, have the potential to improve the operations of agencies and to enable them to become more responsive to the needs of both HEIs and stakeholders, thus generally improving HE systems in Namibia. Meta-evaluations may also be effective tools to increase harmonisation among QAAs at the regional, and even international levels. In addition, meta-evaluations have a positive impact on the credibility of HEIs' accreditation, thus enabling international competitiveness.

We established that meta-evaluations have been implemented successfully in Europe with the implementation of the ESG by ENQA as part of the Bologna Process, and where implemented, the outcomes tend to show that meta-evaluations are indeed, a necessary tool. The practice of meta-evaluations should therefore be encouraged in countries such as Namibia, where they are rarely adopted; ideally as a compulsory practice. This would harmonise QA systems not only beyond national borders, but on a global level.

While it is commendable that Africa has followed in Europe's footsteps by establishing the ASG-QA, the implementation of such standards is limited on the continent. Accordingly, we recommend the implementation of meta-evaluations in QAAs in Namibia as this would help QAAs to improve their capacity to effectively evaluate HEIs. Namibia should also prioritise autonomy in the process of evaluating evaluators to empower QAAs to implement the recommendations emanating from reviews.

Finally, we recommend that Namibia should prioritise the review of existing national QA policy instruments to include compulsory meta-evaluations as is the practice in Europe. In line with Clark's (1970, 1972) model, such a policy would legitimise and provide the necessary authority for the practice. Furthermore, we recommend resource mobilisation and capacity development for QAAs in Africa and in Namibia in particular in order for meta-evaluations to be impactful.

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