

Internal Quality Assurance Practices on Open Education in Two East African Universities: Proposed Innovative Mechanisms

Abstract

Anchored on the premise that internal quality assurance (IQA) systems and processes of universities should be sufficiently operational, well oriented and committed to guarantee the fitness for purpose of an educational programme, this mixed explanatory and hermeneutic paradigm model of empirical investigation was undertaken to elicit evidence based quantitative and qualitative data on these challenging queries in IQA systems in East African universities: (1) were existing practices synchronizing with national and international agendas on open education? (2) were there flexible structured systems for students' open access, progress, mobility and institutional core activities, and (3) feedback mechanisms from alumni, stakeholders and labor market? This study focused on two uncontrolled types of research environments, University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB) and Kampala International University (KIU) in Rwanda and Uganda respectively. Three sets of research tools tested for validity and reliability were utilized namely: (1) a checklist and (2) an interview schedule and a questionnaire. Through purposive sampling, the data were gathered from managers and staff of quality assurance directorates. Relevant information on structures and mechanisms of monitoring and feedback were also retrieved from randomly selected representatives from student organizations, alumni associations and academic staff. Noted in tables/graphs and qualitative analyses were the following findings: (1) both universities had necessary policies generally synchronizing with international agendas on open education though in practice there were rooms for improvement; (2) in both universities, there were systems with mechanisms for students' open access, progress, mobility, aligned with teaching and learning activities but some inadequacies were noted in support to students' learning; (3) comments from alumni were limited in one university. Within the context of these findings, proposed innovative mechanisms were suggested in view of the relevant trends in improving open access to quality education, promoting students' learning experiences.

Key words: Quality assurance system, open education, university, stakeholder

I. Introduction

Universities all over the world have been marked by intention to produce quality graduates though explicit quality assurance mechanisms were mainly introduced in last century (Inter-University Council for East Africa, 2010). Mavil (2013) claims that higher education has been interested in quality assurance since its inception. He gives example of medieval universities which were marked by two models of quality assurance: the first was that of French universities where quality control was entrusted to external body and the second was represented by Italian universities with internal quality assurance systems marked by autonomy of academic staff but with accountability and peer review practices.

Universities have complex responsibilities of training the different types of manpower that the labour markets need, doing research, and serving the communities. In this framework, universities are accountable to a variety of stakeholders comprising governments, employers, students, and parents to ensure that the graduates they send to the labour markets are fit for the purpose (Anane & Addaney, 2016). Today universities have increased considerably in numbers in every corner of the world and these universities host a big number of students who pay a considerable amount of money. Therefore, the governments must assure those students and their parents that their money is worth the quality of education they receive. This increase in number of universities also brings about acute competition. This competition is emphasized by globalization where universities compete not only with others inside the countries but also globally (Inter-University Council for East Africa, 2010). To tackle this complex situation, universities develop robust quality assurance mechanisms to sustain in the market and to convince the stakeholders that they offer services and produce graduates that are fit for the purpose.

Quality is an abstract concept and is perceived differently. Many researchers and institutions in charge of quality assurance agree on the definition of quality as "fitness for purpose" (Akareem & Hossain, 2016; Mavil, 2013; Inter-University Council for East Africa, 2010). In the views of Koslowsky (2006), quality of a university is determined by the following factors: (1) reputation and performances of academic staff, (2) conformity of services to the expectations of consumers, (3) students' competences acquired from the curricula and lecturers' expertise, (4) ratio of performance and cost, and (5) students' satisfaction. Ibrahim (2015) describes quality in more specific terms. For

him, quality is characterized by set standards to be met through students' learning; and how the university meets the expectations of the society, the regulations of the government, the aspirations of the students, and the general practices of the professional world.

These different views of researchers show the complexity of quality and the challenging task of assuring the quality for universities. According to Matovu (2017), quality assurance must be done at all the levels of university structures from the units to the office of the chancellor and cover all the activities including students' admission, teaching, learning and assessment practices, programme development, assessment and validation, resources utilization among others. This view was shared by Soleine and Ringuet (2008) who claim that quality assurance "should encompass the whole institution and the learning environment" (p.4).

This complexity of quality assurance is further stressed by globalization which promotes open education and students' mobility all over the world. Latchem (2016) describes this situation in these terms: "*Internationalism* has become a mantra in higher education, and universities across the world are being encouraged to reap the benefits of global and technological interconnectedness" (p. 9). This globalization as well as increasing demand for higher education have led universities in all the corners of the globe to launch various open and distance learning (ODL) programmes. Open and distance learning was encouraged in government policies as a means of allowing access to higher education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2003).

The development of open education was also instigated by development in technology of information and communication. Iiyoshi and Kumar (n.d) describe the situation and effect of open education as follows:

...tens of thousands of course Web sites and other educational materials are now freely available from hundreds of institutions, organizations, and projects from thousands of educators around the world, representing an unprecedented upsurge in access to educational resources. At the same time, hundreds of educational institutions have joined international consortia and alliances to develop and share open educational technologies, resources, and repositories, creating new models of collaboration for the production and distribution of educational resources (pp 2-3).

The description of open education by Commonwealth of Learning (2010, p.10) as "a flexible education system that allows learners to learn where and when they want, physically away from a school and a teacher" is worth noting for a better understanding of this growing trend in education.

Open education is an opportunity for universities to expand themselves but without forgetting the challenge of quality assurance to ensure the various stakeholders (Mannan, 2016). The way universities adapt their academic programmes, set up strategies for embracing these increasing educational practices and enhance their quality assurance mechanisms is a mark of institutional viability. The question thus is to know how universities in East Africa have been reacting to this global trend in higher education at the same time reinforcing the quality assurance mechanisms and practices. This research was conducted in two universities in Uganda and Rwanda to assess quality assurance practices in those universities vis-à-vis open education.

II. Materials and Methods

To conduct the research, qualitative and quantitative data were collected in two universities in Rwanda and Uganda, namely University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB) and Kampala International University (KIU). UTAB is a private university established in 2006 and KIU, also a private university, was founded in 2001. Data were collected in the Directorates of Quality Assurance, among academic staff, students' associations and alumni purposively sampled. Below is a table showing the persons who were involved in this research in each university totalling 174 respondents.

Table 1: Categories of respondents involved in the study

No	University	Function	Number
1	UTAB	Director of Quality Assurance	1
2	UTAB	Deputy Director of Quality Assurance	1
3	UTAB	Quality officer	1
4	UTAB	Head of Department	6
5	UTAB	Chair person of Department QA Committee	6
6	UTAB	Academic staff	30
7	UTAB	Members of students' association	12
8	UTAB	Members of alumni	30
9	KIU	Director of Quality Assurance	1
10	KIU	Deputy Director of Quality Assurance	1
11	KIU	Quality officer	1
12	KIU	Head of Department	6
13	KIU	Chair person of Department QA Committee	6
14	KIU	Academic staff	30
15	KIU	Members of students' association	12
16	KIU	Members of alumni	30
Total			174

The data were collected in three stages. In the first stage, data were collected by observation with the use of a checklist. The researchers visited the offices of quality assurance to look at the various policies including the general academic regulations, admission policy, open and distance learning policy, and quality assurance manuals. In the second stage, data were collected by a questionnaire through web survey. In the third stage, the directors of quality assurance were interviewed in order to enable the researchers to have deep understanding of quality assurance mechanisms and related challenges.

To analyse quantitative data, frequency tables were used. Qualitative data of two types were collected and analysed according to their types. Data obtained by observation with a checklist were summarized in a table while data obtained by interview were transcribed then desired information extracted.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Provision for Open Education in University Policies and Other Practices

University of Technology and Arts of Byumba and Kampala International University have aligned their strategies to open education for many years. The general academic regulations and other key policies in both universities take into account the various aspects of open education by making provisions for a variety of modes of study. At UTAB, mention of “full time students”, also referred to as “day programme”, “part time students” or “weekend programme” and open and distance learning in all academic programmes except the Faculty of Agriculture, Environmental Management and Renewable Energy is made in General Academic Regulations and there are specific policies governing the different modes of study such as Open and Distance Learning (ODL) policy. Likewise, KIU has had diverse modes of study comprising full time, open and distance learning and in-service. However, the use of online mechanisms and learning management system (LMS) is not developed enough. While UTAB has undertaken the development of Moodle, a commonly used LMS, KIU still relies on the use of printed materials and face-to-face sessions in ODL practices.

In both universities, the general academic regulations provide room for transfer from one mode of study to another and for transfer of credits from other universities and institutions of higher learning. In addition to flexibility in the choice of modes of study and mobility from one university to another, the policies in both universities involved in this study regulate the practices of ODL and part time study. In order to ensure the quality of education, there are specific policies which outline the support and required materials for adequate learning. Table 2 below shows the key policies in UTAB and KIU governing the different of modes of study.

Table 2: Provision for open education in policies at UTAB and KIU

No	Item	UTAB	KIU
1	Provision for open education in General academic regulations	All the requirements are provided for.	All the requirements are provided for.
2	Various modes of study available for students as per general academic regulations	Full time, weekend and ODL	Full time, ODL, in-service
3	Provision for transfer from one mode of study to another	Possibility to transfer from one mode to another	Possibility to transfer from one mode to another
4	Provision for credit transfer	Credits from other HLIs can be transferred.	Credits from other HLIs can be transferred.
5	Provision for choosing among various modes of study in admission policy	On application forms a student chooses a mode of study	On application forms a student chooses a mode of study
6	Provision for registration to a mode of one's choice in registration form	Registration forms have rooms for selecting the mode of study	Registration forms have rooms for selecting the mode of study
7	Conditions for promotion of students in ODL clearly stated	Same policy as full time students.	Separate policy for ODL
8	ODL policy provides for specific support to students' learning	Specific support mainly face-to-face sessions and a plan to use LMS (Moodle)	Mainly face-to-face sessions
9	Availability of human and material support to assist ODL students	Same academic and support staff serve ODL students and full time students	Separate Department with administrative and support staff for ODL
10	Mechanisms for online studies	Have started to use LMS (Moodle) but it is not common among the students and lecturers.	The use of LMS not undertaken yet

Source: Field data

The findings as presented in table 2 show that these universities embraced the change in higher education structure by opening their doors to students in need to carry out their studies while continuing to attend to their other different activities. The key policies, mainly the general academic regulations, take into account the necessity for a variety of modes of study. This orientation is an important step towards the realization of national development objectives as taken by all African countries (Mathew & Iloanya, n.d). Likewise, Singh (2017) advises that to cope with the rapid change occurring in every aspect of life throughout the world, opening education by allowing more access to education and by using technology is a must.

Nevertheless opening education may not bring desired results if attention is not sufficiently paid to quality aspect. One of the pillars of quality education today is the use of technology in education because it allows the students and lecturers to access quality learning materials, facilitates interaction among students and lecturers, and enriches assessment practices (Kulshrestha & Kant, 2013). In this regard, UTAB and KIU still have room for improvement. UTAB is on the way to start using LMS to enhance ODL while KIU has not made a decision to that end.

3.2 Role of Stakeholders in Strengthening the Quality of Education at UTAB and KIU

Both UTAB and KIU closely work with stakeholders in reviewing academic programmes and assessing the quality of education. This is done through regular interaction with alumni working in various industries and collection of information on the needs of the labour markets during forums with industry. These stakeholders comprise officials from public and private sectors in every field of education offered in these universities. Every year, each university organizes a forum during which those stakeholders meet academic managers, academic staff and students to exchange views on different topics with the purpose of enhancing the quality of education.

Views on these practices were collected from 174 respondents comprising academic middle managers, namely the heads of departments, some staff from the directorates of quality assurance, selected academic staff, members of students' associations and alumni. As it was an online survey, questionnaires were sent to a large number of respondents and when 87 duly answered ones were received, the process was stopped.

As it can be seen in table 3, in UTAB, there were many cases of respondents who “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” on the roles played by stakeholders in strengthening the quality of education. However, the majority “agreed” and a good number “strongly agreed”.

Table 3: Views on the role of stakeholders in strengthening the quality of education at UTAB

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
University works with industry and alumni to get feedback on its performance.	27	12	31	17
Forums for alumni, representatives of industry, staff and students' associations are regularly organized.	25	13	34	15
Inputs from different stakeholders play a role in improving the quality of education.	24	15	29	19
All the relevant stakeholders get opportunities to provide feedback and contribute to the improvement of the quality of education.	28	19	26	14
The various stakeholders find the quality of education at UTAB satisfactory.	10	13	52	22

Source: Field Data

In KIU, the trend was different from that of UTAB. Cases of strong disagreement and disagreement on the roles played by stakeholders and alumni on the enhancement of quality of education were very few at it can be seen in table 4. A very high number agreed and strongly agreed on the role played by stakeholders and alumni on strengthening the quality of education.

Table 4: Views on the role of stakeholders in strengthening the quality of education at KIU

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
University works with industry and alumni to get feedback on its performance.	0	6	57	24
Forums for alumni, representatives of industry, staff and students' associations are regularly organized.	0	9	54	24
Inputs from different stakeholders play a role in improving the quality of education.	3	5	60	19
All the relevant stakeholders get opportunities to provide feedback and contribute to the improvement of the quality of education.	1	4	59	23
The various stakeholders find the quality of education at KIU satisfactory.	0	0	42	45

Source: Field data

After noticing this significant difference between the perceptions of the stakeholders on their roles in enhancing the quality of education in UTAB and in KIU, the researchers judged it necessary to enquire into the causes of this divergence. The directors of Quality Assurance were judged to be in good position to clarify this situation and were interviewed.

The causes of the difference were identified as the fact that at UTAB there are no mechanisms to organize alumni, to interact with them and to collect feedback from them. The alumni from UTAB do not have an association. Therefore when they were asked to give their views on the statements that stakeholders and alumni played a role in enhancing the quality of education, a good number of them either “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed”.

On the other hand, KIU has a strong organization for mobilizing alumni and collecting feedback from them for the purpose of enhancing the quality of education. This was the explanation on the fact that the significant majority of respondents from KIU “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the stakeholders and alumni played an important role in giving feedback and strengthening the quality of education.

One of the characteristics of strong quality assurance mechanisms is involvement of students and alumni in the process of quality assurance (Ryan, 2015). Having invested their time and money in studying in the university, the students are among the most important stakeholders and need quality in every aspect during their studies. Above all, alumni, having spent a good time in the university and having had time to face the realities of real world, they are in a very good position to judge the quality of education in their university. The importance of working with alumni for universities was further emphasized by Semova (2018) who argues that universities should invest in alumni association because they can benefit in various ways mainly in enhancing the quality of education.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

The two universities involved in this research, namely University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB) and Kampala International University (KIU) have policies adapted to open education. Their general academic regulations provide for the different modes of study and there are specific policies governing students’ admission, registration, promotion, credit transfer and certification in open education. But some shortcomings were noted in UTAB in terms of staffing where they do not have staff specifically for ODL students, and in KIU where they lack an LMS.

The majority of stakeholders who participated in this study on the side of both universities “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the quality of education in those universities was satisfactory but at a lower degree in the case of UTAB. In UTAB some stakeholders mainly alumni “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” on the statement that the stakeholders were satisfied with the quality of education in that university. The major reason of this dissatisfaction was mainly low involvement of alumni in giving feedback. In fact in this university there are no mechanisms to systematically organize alumni and regularly collect feedback among them. In the case of KIU they have a strong system for working with alumni who significantly play a role in supporting their university in various ways, mainly in improving the quality of education.

On the basis of the findings of this research, some recommendations were made. First, to strengthen the process of quality assurance, the universities should develop systematic arrangement for collecting feedback from all the key stakeholders including students and alumni. Second, to improve the quality of learning, universities should have strong support systems including specific staff for ODL, and LMS which allows interaction among students and lecturers and helps in the process of assessing students’ learning.

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