

Towards a comparative study of quality assurance in Nigerian and South African higher education

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Abstract

Quality assurance policies have been introduced in the higher education systems of many countries. These developments have occurred against the backdrop of globalisation, the internationalisation of higher education, and the knowledge economy. We shall show how, as a conceptual tool, the idea of quality assurance is problematic and that there is no commonly accepted definition of quality assurance. We discuss the relevant literature and argue that in future comparative studies of South African and Nigerian higher education could contribute to current understandings of quality assurance. Such studies, based upon the perspectives of local constituents, have to date not been carried out in Africa.

Key words: quality assurance, higher education, Nigeria, South Africa

Introduction

This paper examines the enactment of quality assurance policies in higher education in 2 African countries against the background of the global role knowledge production has come to play. We review a key problem in the relevant literature: debates about the meaning or meanings of quality assurance.

After decades of discussion involving many thousands of people from around the world, there seems no simple way of clarifying higher education quality, performance and accountability, or of distinguishing between these elusive yet important ideas (Hazelkorn, Coates & McCormick, 2018: 3).

From this discussion, research problems, goals and questions are identified. The research problems revolve around a comparative study of the implementation of quality assurance in Nigerian and South African higher education. Our aim is to outline future research based in Africa that would contribute to the existing international debates about quality assurance.

The knowledge economy and quality assurance in higher education

Knowledge has become an international product that is freely traded today. Knowledge crosses national and regional boundaries faster than capital and faster than people. Knowledge drives growth in the most important economic sectors of leading industrialised countries. It is applied to the production of goods and services and forms the basis for human resource development and capacity building. Knowledge-based economies have a global orientation, scope and operation, making them drivers and constituents of globalisation. In many countries the higher education sector has grown faster than other economic sectors which have lagged behind. This has boosted the demand for higher education. Higher education has also provided better

opportunities for investment and profit generation. The production of goods in the new knowledge economy often depends on innovation and the application of technology. Universities deal in knowledge production and are charged by society to create new knowledge through research. Governments and universities have sought to attract international students to national universities. Private and public nationally-based higher education institutions have looked to foreign countries and have implemented programmes which have appeared to be commercially viable. New providers of higher education have mushroomed, exploited market opportunities and have established independent corporates and agreements with traditionally public tertiary institutions and departments within universities. Globalisation's relationship to higher education is manifested in the economic role knowledge has come to play in today's world (Varghese, 2008; Carnoy 2005; Knight 2007; Teichler, 2008).

The knowledge economy has been actively promoted by international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. In this regard two international policy developments are significant: the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) and the Bologna Process. These are examples of the internationalisation of higher education insofar as internationalisation refers to the adoption of specific policies within the broader processes of globalisation. Since the adoption of these policies in the late 1990s almost all African countries, encouraged by organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and the African Union (AU), have sought to emulate the Bologna model and to implement GATS (Sall & Ndjaye, 2007). Thus in 2009 an African Quality Assurance Network was established, with the support of the WB and UNESCO. Today almost all African countries have established statutory bodies whose goals are typically to set minimum standards for programmes in higher education and to monitor and evaluate institutions such as universities. The basic idea is to strengthen institutions so that they may fulfil their roles in contributing towards economic growth. How then can quality assurance policies in higher education contribute to the promotion of socio-economic

development? Many countries across the world, as diverse, for example, as South Africa and the Philippines, appear to have assumed that by strengthening the higher education sector through quality assurance economic growth can be stimulated. The mechanisms of quality assurance are seen as levers for improved higher education systems, thus stimulating national domestic products. Equally significant is that many countries have experienced implementation difficulties in promoting quality in higher education (Adeyemo & Weber, 2018). Quality in education is “described by writers of old as an ‘elusive concept’” (Sanyal 2013: 7), resulting in practical implementation problems that stem from its “contested, multifaceted notion with a variety of meanings” (Krause 2012: 285). With independent state bodies worldwide tasked with the responsibility of improving and securing the quality of education, the question of what constitutes “quality” has become pronounced (Lagrosen, SeyyedHashemi and Leitner 2004). Krause (2012: 286) refers to this as a “wicked problem.” Wicked problems “are ill-defined, views on possible solutions vary widely across diverse parties with a vested interest in the problems and how to address them, the problems change in scope and nature on a daily basis and according to the setting in which they are addressed and today’s apparent solution is no guarantee of tomorrow’s success”.

A common way in which quality is defined today is in the form of managerial policies and practices in response to new economic and academic demands, with governance comprising of “[a]udits, accreditation, quality control systems, budgets, benchmarks, strategies with visions and goals, and other new public systems of management” (Engebretsen, Heggen and Eilertsen 2012: 404; Singh 2010). “Quality” is therefore quantifiably measurable, likening statistical measures, such as the percentage of students who complete study programmes, to the quality of the programme (Engebretsen et al. 2012), and whether or not particular programmes should be accredited and recognised. This perspective delineates quality as something that can be found written down in documentation, eliminating other important factors that are fundamental within professional practice and which affect student learning, such as “[t]acit knowledge [and] professional discretion and skills” (Engebretsen et al. 2012: 411). According to Anderson (2006: 167), in recent times the “emphasis has shifted to quantitative forms of quality measurement,

often involving the use of performance indicators” and “some go to the extreme of claiming that if something cannot be measured, it cannot be of value”.

Adding to the complexity and wickedness of the problem and the political meaning of quality are various stakeholders who are involved in the conversation, with interested parties ranging from “students, academic and professional staff, university managers and community groups, to governments, employers, research sponsors and the media” (Krause 2012: 287, see also Lim 2010). Krause (2012: 287-288) argues that “quality is a multi-faceted, contested notion with political undertones that must necessarily be interpreted in terms of purpose and context” and “[d]epending on which perspective one adopts, the concept of quality may have different meanings”. Thus depending on context and perspective, quality can be interpreted and implemented differently. Krause (2012: 288) says stakeholders at national and institutional levels define quality with “such terms as ‘excellence’, ‘consistency’, ‘value for money’ or ‘fitness for purpose’”, while stakeholders at departmental level (such as academic staff) “are more likely to attach situated meanings to the term ‘quality’” which includes ‘ritualism’ and ‘tokenism’, quality as ‘impression management’ and quality as ‘lack of mutual trust’” and “the interpretation of quality as excellence is the interpretation that best matches the student’s view of quality” (Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi and Leitner 2004: 67). Anderson (2006: 161) comments on the misalignments between university management and academic staff’s views of quality assurance and argues that “until university management, university quality agencies and academic staff in universities draw on mutually agreed understandings of this contested concept—quality—academics will continue to resist quality processes, treating them as games to be played and systems to be fed”. Academics cannot be ignored because of their locations and the power and influence they wield within universities. They are crucial to any process of implementation. The same applies to students (Coates, 2005). A useful distinction has been made by Skolnik (2010) between the “technical” managerial approach to quality assurance and the “political” approach:

quality assurance requires making choices among competing conceptions of quality, and in so doing privileges some interests over others. Moreover, some stakeholders tend to be given a greater voice than others in the design and implementation of quality assurance. The author concludes that rather than denying the political nature of quality assurance, it would be better to accept Morley's claim that quality assurance is "a socially constructed domain of power", and design procedures for it in a way that is appropriate for a political process.

Harvey (2007: 2) writes that there are four purposes of quality assurance in higher education: "accountability, control, compliance and improvement", while Billing (2004:114) concludes that nuances can be found within Harvey's definitions. Purposes can include "'improvement' through 'public assurance' to 'government goals, targeting resources, [and] rationalisation'", with countries like Sweden and Finland emphasising improvement, "while Denmark and Norway emphasise purposes external to the higher education institution". Commenting on Europe and the establishment of national initiatives in accordance with the Bologna Declaration that calls for "greater harmonisation and synergy", Di Nauta (2004: 20) says that they still "see countless national initiatives in which accreditation is defined and perceived differently". According to Engebretsen et al. (2012: 407) a "related theme in evaluation concerns the relationship between the intentions of evaluation methods and what they measure in practice". These discrepancies and contrasts in the meaning of "quality" are reflected in the problematic implementation of quality assurance frameworks as practitioners are left with the challenge of educating themselves "about the conceptual underpinnings and theoretical paradigms shaping the quality discourse and the relative merits of each" (Krause 2012: 289). Di Nauta (2004: 20) writes on the implementation of quality assurance and says that diversity is to be found in higher education in the form of various "types of education; administrative relationships between institutions of higher education and universities; size[s] of institutions of higher education; [ways] education is being modernised...; method[s] of selection...; dual programmes or other programmes; extensive or intensive education; electronic learning

environments”. With these differences, Di Nauta (2004: 20) questions the applicability of a “one size fits all” quality system, with comparability as the main feature “with the aim of assessing similar courses or institutions in a single procedure using the same assessment framework”. The applicability of such a system gives rise to alternative questions about whether such systems should make way for “the Golden Gun of the tailor-made alternative?” (Di Nauta 2004: 21). The need for “large comparative policy-oriented research projects in the area of higher education” has also been discussed in this context (Gornitzka 1999: 5). Globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education are developments which drive uniformity and pressures to adopt one size that fits all discourses and policies.

South Africa and Nigeria

The “other important factors” to which Engebretsen et al. refer above may be features of the society that are crucial to national life and to higher education. Questions of diversity, for example, are central to Nigerian and South African society. They arise historically in Nigeria in relation to ethnicity and in South Africa in regard to race and the legacies of apartheid. In both countries socio-economic class cuts across ethnicity and race when it comes to questions in regard to access to higher education and in regard to whom the respective higher education systems serve or are supposed to serve. It is therefore debatable in these contexts and countries whether technical or statistical and a-social definitions of quality are useful in serving the public good. For instance, the development in Nigeria, in line with global developments to rank universities, poses the question of the criteria of quality according to which they should be ranked and what constitutes the public good. These are far from universally accepted.

The South African and Nigerian cases draw our attention to 2 common problems found in developing countries: lack of resources and institutional capacity to implement programmes of quality assurance that, moreover, were developed in rich countries cognizant of the circumstances in rich countries. Allais (2011) talks about the National Qualifications Framework

(NQF) in South Africa and the failure to achieve its objectives because of a lack of resources on the part of the relevant authorities. Allais (2011: 352) suggests that the NQF's failure stems from its claim "to be able to solve or at least contribute to the solution of problems," and its position as a "system that would drive an increase in provision and an improvement in quality", ignoring the need for additional educational institutions to be built and developed in order to achieve this objective. This is because resources (time, money, energy and focus) were diverted away from the building of institutions to the fulfilment of other objectives. 'Lack of funding' is frequently cited as a key challenge in quality assurance in many countries (Odhiambo 2014). In a broader sense this concerns the question facing many developing countries: how much of their gross domestic products are invested in education in general and higher education in particular? If there is formal recognition of the strategic importance of higher education in the knowledge economy, then are the budgetary allocations made to higher education adequate?

Lack of resources also represents itself in the form of system capacity. As noted by Allais (2011: 354) the implementation of the NQF and its "institution-based assessment" was not feasible "in a context of inequality, where institutions, for historical reasons, had substantially different levels of capacity". Solving the problem of low quality would have required "an army of moderators, with extensive subject expertise in the appropriate fields (which is missing in South Africa), as well as expertise in assessment, and thousands of similarly equipped verifiers to check up on the work of each moderator". In addition, after reviewing audit findings of academic boards, Baird (2007: 101) suggests that there is a great need for governing bodies to pay attention to academic boards and their roles and abilities to "fulfil their roles in quality assurance and leadership.

"Institutional capacity to carry out policy mandates in regard to quality is also evident in Nigeria in the National University Commission (NUC), in the Philippines in the Commission on Higher Education, and in developing countries in general (Adeyemo and Weber, 2018; Singh, 2010). The Nigerian higher education system as a whole is not adequately funded. There are challenges which relate to poor infrastructure, research output, the standard of academic programmes, and training and retaining qualified staff (Albert, 2014). The situation is

exacerbated by the rapid growth of unregulated private institutions of higher learning, the establishment of satellite campuses, and agreements between non-university organisations and businesses and Nigerian universities. Thus unrecognised qualifications have been awarded. These developments have taken place without and despite mandatory, legal approvals required by the NUC (Okojie, 2010).

What can we learn from a comparison between Nigeria and South Africa? Why compare Nigeria to South Africa? These are, of course, two very different African countries with different histories, political systems and societies (see Di Nauta, 2004 above). And yet, as with all other African countries, *similar* quality assurance policies underpinned by *similar* international and global discourses are being implemented in both countries. An important section of the South African higher education system comprises of amongst the highest ranked universities on the continent and such a comparison might arguably also hold when the best of the South African sector is compared to the Nigerian higher education sector as a whole. However, what this discussion might mean for the pursuit and attainment of “quality,” based upon what and whose criteria, is problematic. An analysis into it is likely to contribute to our understanding of the meaning of quality in African and international higher education more broadly. The same question, albeit in another context, arises in Europe where the “harmonisation” under the Bologna Process is supposed to take place across what are different higher education systems with different histories, traditions and systems. According to Billing (2004: 113) comparisons of European countries “show that a ‘general model’ of external quality assurance does not universally apply, but that most elements of it do apply in most countries ... the ‘general model’ provides a starting point from which to map deviations.”

Conclusion

Within the broad context of the knowledge economy and contemporary international development, three important, interrelated questions arise: (1) What are the official, formal understandings of quality assurance in Nigeria and South Africa? What discourses, national and international, underpin them? (2) What are the perspectives and views of key stakeholders on the

ground, especially those charged with its day-to-day implementation? (3) How, comparatively, is quality assurance implemented? What challenges have arisen? The overarching question concerns the meaning of quality and quality assurance in African higher education.

Future research can explore these problems, based on the systematic collection of comparative qualitative and quantitative data. There is a great deal of similarity in regard to some of the basic ideas that inform quality assurance. Those ideas and discourses are likely to be mediated within the policy texts of different countries and during the variety of processes of implementation by the people who enact them. Hardly any such research at the grassroots has been undertaken in Africa, i.e. research which seeks to understand the similarities and diversities and the diversities within the similarities across the continent.

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