



TOWARDS EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE QUALITY EDUCATION IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN ESWATINI

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This paper seeks to articulate an understanding of the notion of quality and quality assurance in higher education, and why it needs to be prioritised by all Institutions of Higher Learning. It further presents contextually relevant principles (ways) that HEIs in Eswatini, and countries in similar contexts, need to implement as the first call towards achieving quality education.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, there has been a growing emphasis on the pursuit of higher education output that is of excellent quality. This universal shift has necessitated the prioritisation and making of quality assurance an integral part of educational reforms for Higher Education in Eswatini. Through the Higher Education Act of 2013, the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC) was mandated to regulate the provision of higher education in the country. The aim was to ensure that all Institutions of Higher Learning (HEIs), both private and public adhere to strict quality assurance standards. The prioritisation of quality assurance in higher education has been precipitated by the drastic effects of the prevailing needs for competitiveness in an increasing globalising knowledge society, political, socio-economic demands and developments (Shava, Sithole, Moyo & Mupezeni, 2021, p. 659). Such a demand has also been hastened by competition in the international market and the need for accountability (Morgan, Jobe, Kopona et al., 2022) as well as advances in information technology. Awino and Agolla (2008, p. 213) argue that the need to “counter and face squarely such impacts” highlights the requirement for quality assurance in education for all countries and institutions.

This paper seeks to articulate the understanding of the notion of quality and quality assurance in higher education, and why it needs to be prioritised by all Institutions of Higher Learning. It further presents contextually relevant principles (ways) that HEIs in Eswatini, and countries in similar contexts, need to implement as the first call towards achieving quality education.

QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

According to Woodhouse (1999), quality in higher education is about the generation and interrogation of ideas of excellence, outstanding performance and fitness for purpose. It has to do with higher education that conforms to laid down standards and specifications, that seeks to achieve the institutional goals and meet the contextual stated or implied needs (Harvery & Green, 1993). Quality assurance then has to do with the process of ensuring educational quality. That is, an ongoing and continuous process of evaluating, assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of educational systems and institutional programs (Morgan, Jobe, Kopona et al., 2022), to fit purpose. It is a process of ensuring educational excellence, and includes all activities related to assessing and improving the value of one (or more) standards in the implementation of processes within programmes offered and other institutional processes that support the adherence to these standards. Such processes ensure that educational operations remain standardised, conform to specifications and requirements, and are constantly remarkably of high quality (Shava et al., 2021).

Moreover, quality assurance ensures that policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being enhanced and maintained in every educational institution (Woodhouse, 1999, p. 30) are prioritised. In essence, quality assurance is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to safeguard and guarantee that the desired quality however defined and measured, is delivered and achieved (Shava et al., 2021). It is therefore only when an institution of higher learning or the programmes therein meet the desired specifications and limitations as laid down by the regulating council, its objectives as an institution and also towards meeting and addressing the contextual needs of the environment. It is only then that it can be regarded as one that offers quality education as well as an excellent or a quality service provider (Shava et al., 2021). Undeniably, if “education [the product] does not fit its purpose, the needs of the environment, then its perfection is irrelevant”, (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 17).

The role of HEIs to stimulate national economic growth and to contribute to the production of the optimal value of “internationalised” students (Becket & Brookes, 2008) cannot be overemphasised. This therefore calls for quality assurance processes that are both rigorous and transparent, and that which enhancement initiatives are firmly embedded in any quality assurance programme (Sharabi, 2013). Committing to educational quality is what would motivate HEIs to establish quality programs, to regularly check and recheck their programs, processes and activities. It would help them to predict failures, identify problems before they

happen and how these could be mitigated (Hanh, 2019). Most importantly, it ensures that institutions achieve their goals, satisfy the needs of their students and the society as well as ensuring that their graduates acquire adequate skills that would enable them to integrate well into the national and international job market (Kopnina, 2020).

ENSURING QUALITY EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Considering that poverty, hence educational inequality predicates a large percentage of students in the country, quality education for Eswatini would be one that is framed within and guided by the principles of social justice. That is, higher institutions need to foreground social justice in their thinking about quality education. Madonsela (2020) defines social justice as, the just, fair and equitable distribution of all opportunities, resources, privileges and burdens in a society. It embraces “the humanity of every person so that nobody should find it harder than others to exist in society, and nobody should bear more burdens than others” (p. 5). Similarly, Hasan (1971) says, social justice has to do with assembling and establishing external conditions required by every citizen, for the development of their capabilities. Having the principles of social justice engrained in the practises of higher education would therefore ensure equitable access for all, fairness and “integrating students at the subservient as well as those in advantaged positions” (Klaseen, 2020, p. 2) towards equal opportunities for academic success.

Baimuratov, Myshshak and Krynytska (2018) point out that the social institution of higher education does not function in isolation, but is an organic part of the society, in which social relations are equitable. This kind of education would therefore be one that considers the issues of diversity and inequality within the student population in every institutions’ quest for quality education. That is, ensuring “full and equal participation of all ... [students in the different institutions] ... that is mutually shaped to meet their needs,” (Bell, 1997, p. 3). So as to reduce and eventually “eliminate the perpetuation of the privileging of some and disadvantaging others” (Calderwood, 2003, p. 4), and undo the socially created and maintained differences in material conditions of living. Otherwise such “quality” education, as they define it, might run the risk of being perfectly useless. Indeed, Klaasen (2020) argues that the quality of education for any given context does not only rely on educational activities, but also opportunities for its achievement.

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Sustainable education is firmly grounded on the concept of sustainable development, which gained credence in the higher education sector through the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Following the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, the United Nations Member States, including Eswatini adopted the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Countries committed themselves into advocating for peace and prosperity for both people and the planet by transforming the world through adopting 17 Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). Whilst the MDGs focused attention on universal primary attainment, Goal 4 of the SDG's highlights that not only primary education, but also higher education needs to be taken cognisance of towards assuring quality education for all. The attention given to equitable and sustainable higher education is also viewed as means to eradicate poverty in all forms (United Nations, 2015).

Like in most African countries, poverty has ravaged Eswatini, compromised the livelihood of a large percentage of Emaswati (the people of Eswatini) and has remained a challenge in the whole education sector for decades now. Hence, making the execution of higher education that is of quality a farfetched dream not only for the government, but also for institutions of higher learning in general. By adopting the SDGs and tailoring them into educational programmes, institutional processes and activities can help Eswatini outsmart this challenge and assure quality education. This could be one of the means towards eradicating poverty and also towards achieving both sustainable development and quality education for the country. Bornman (2004) argues that, one cannot make an appeal for quality assurance without having programmes and institutional processes that are developed with sustainability in mind. Again, considering that the role of education as a whole is to create societies with sustainability built into its foundation (Timbi-Sisalima, Sánchez-Gordón, Hilera-Gonzalez & Otón-Tortosa, 2022), building sustainability into the foundation of institutional programmes and processes would therefore ensure that the graduates would be educated for "the now and the future" (Kopnina, 2020, p. 8).

Such graduates would have the capability to challenge the dominant material, ecological, psychological, economic, and social paradigms that define us as Emaswati (and the international community at large), and would lead holistic social, economic and political initiatives that would address current challenges threatening our general livelihood and probably those of generations to come (Medrick, 2013). At the cornerstone of the curricular for future responsible citizens and with sustainability framing institutional programmes and processes, students could also be educated about the values, opportunities, and choices each person has to develop themselves; thus becoming aware, independent, responsible, and active agents of their fate. In that way, they would be ready to contribute to the future of our society and the development of its ecological systems (Sterling, 2010).

IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY TOWARDS QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance is not only a vital tool for institutions that wish to be transformative, relevant, consistently exceptional and securing a competitive advantage both nationally and internationally (Green, 1994), but a concept that needs to be contextually and relevantly implemented in all contexts and by all institutions of higher learning. Below I present some of

the ways framed within the principles of social justice and sustainability that HEIs could adopt and implement towards ensuring higher education that is of high and excellent quality.

To start with, institutional programmes should facilitate an equally enabling learning environment that enrich the academic and intellectual landscape for all students. That is, institutions need to design institutional policies and programmes that ensure that the education at this level is shaped in such a way that it considers dominant structural barriers to the students' education through addressing the varying levels of need as predicted by unequal economic levels that are prevalent in the country (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). This would require that institutions recognise the range of socio-economic inequality and diversity within the student population as to ensure that institutional processes and programmes navigate and outwit any exclusionary practices within our institutions. There is the heightened need to discard the standardised and homogenised education system, which seeks to universalise rather than diversify and contextualise educational experiences, demands and processes by enforcing a one-size-fits all curriculum (Ciftci & Cin, 2018). By so doing, not only ignoring diversity, but also underestimating realities and needs of most students in the country.

For example, the implementation of online learning in the country highlights the stark disparities between students who have the flexibility to access technology and those who were limited by their poor socio-economic conditions. Most students in the country cannot afford the technological devices or data to access internet (Pitikoe, Ferreira-Meyers, Bhebhe & Dlamini-Zwane, 2021). The introduction to information technology is also not yet uniform in the lower levels of the education system. To ensure quality education that is guided by the precepts of social justice, institutions need to consider the contextual enablers and restrictors of this new mode of teaching and learning in higher education. This could be made possible through exploring the feasibility of accessing online platforms for the disadvantaged students in our institutions, and indeed working towards meeting every student at their point of need. This could be by means of providing financial support, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and ensuring that those who graduated from disadvantaged high schools with no formal education in information technologies are given formal spaces to upgrade their knowledge on ICTs without these being treated only as subjects.

This means, there should be visible spaces that are provided for such students to get practical assistance to be taught about the basics of using ICTs to support their academic activities as and when the need arises. For example, some students may need to practice typing, others may need how to use Microsoft Office such as PowerPoint for presentations, skills they need for online research, etc. Such skills, the students will not only use to navigate the academic activities, but will become useful skills for their employability. Hence, this calls for academic programmes designs to ensure that students are given opportunities to learn and use IT skills as part of the learning process that is inherently considered in their continuous assessment.

With sustainability in mind, to address population needs, consumption growth and the steady growth of state economies, HEIs should inculcate and deliver to societies graduates who can critically think about and provide solutions for the economy, social life, culture, politics and social order (through educational awareness) and have the ability to effectively manage and plan for sustainable change. This means HEIs should at least engage students on issues of ethical, moral, aesthetic, spiritual (religious), social, cultural, economic, technical, environmental and legal aspects of life. Pedagogical practices should be arranged around the new pedagogical worlds (experiential, epistemic and systemic), and the new worlds of learning and researching.

Experiential learning would enable the students to use the knowledge learnt to analyse its practical use in the current state of society or imagined future. Programmes therefore need to feature in practical components and/or case studies depending on the discipline to enable students to acquire experiential knowledge in their fields of study. Programme design grounded on epistemic pedagogy enables teaching and learning that embraces scientific investigation of knowledge which pays attention to methods, validity and scope. In other words, students are nurtured to always verify knowledge and evaluate knowledge from various perspectives, and base their findings or evaluation on scientific procedures. Thus, the experiential and epistemic approaches to teaching and learning enables the development of sustainable systems to guide the use and absorption of such knowledge by society. Such an approach to programme development then make students to be of greater service to themselves, their communities, the nation and the global world.

Therefore, educational programmes should be essentially transformative, constructive, and participatory (Sterling, 2010). Institutions of higher learning can therefore adopt and prioritise issues of research and collaboration, so as to remain relevant and knowledgeable about higher education trends (Owens, 2017). Educational programmes that are developed in such a way as to be experiential, fully engaging learners in the process of their own learning and asks participants to take responsibility for their success, future possibilities, and the survivability of human society and culture. This could be made possible by developing programmes that provide learning, training, and practical experience, in both formal and non-formal settings, that fosters personal development, community involvement, and action for change in our human and natural worlds (Medrick, 2013). That would ensure sustainable conditions for graduates' knowledge, skills, competencies, full or self-employability and for sustainable development of human resources. Hence, developing citizens that would gracefully take Eswatini to the sustainable future away from the shackles of poverty, destitution and unemployment.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted how the pursuit of quality and equitable education should be entrenched in the operational cultures of HEIs in Eswatini, without which quality assurance mechanisms and processes will lose their vitality, relevance and synergy that make them transformative and meaningful. For quality assurance initiatives in higher education to bear the desired and expected fruits, HEIs need to consider and seek to address, through their educational processes, the diversity that exists within the student population. Disregarding these could compromise any efforts towards quality education. Sustainability should also be yoked into all educational programmes. Indeed, in today's environment "higher education institutions (HEI's) need to become more efficient and participate in a competitive global job market where expectations are continually evolving and rising as to meet and address the ever-changing societal demands. In ways that would also fuel the engine of economic and social development at the national, towards regional and international levels, also making graduates be of greater service to themselves, their communities and nation towards achieving global and local sustainable communities.

Indeed, it is justifiable to claim that education programmes at higher education institutions, with the emphasis on social justice and sustainability are bound to contribute not only to good quality teaching and learning, but also quality assurance in higher education. Considering these would make higher education in Eswatini to be of value, to promote sustainable development, eradicate poverty and promote economic prosperity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, peace, and good governance for SDG 4). Higher education anchored in social justice and sustainable development will also make graduates from Eswatini to be international standards, and have an opportunity to export their skills globally.

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