BARRIERS TO QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Using the Octet of Quality in Higher Education Framework, this paper identifies and discusses some of the barriers and challenges of implementing internal quality assurance in higher education, which higher education institutions should guard against. It further recommends solutions that could be adopted to navigate these challenges towards offering excellent higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of quality assurance can be understood as a "systematic, structural and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement (Vettori, 2023). As a process, quality assurance determines whether a product or service meets specified requirements, with the intention of preventing quality failures and maintaining excellent service and output. Zaki and Rashidi (2013) further point out that, it is a process that has to do with the continuous maintenance of a desired level of quality in a service or product especially by means of attention to every stage of the process of delivery or production. In higher education therefore, quality assurance has to do with the systematic review of educational provision to maintain and improve educational quality, equity and efficiency (Hanh, 2019). Such and education then ensures that graduates acquire quality education that makes them competent, having acquired knowledge and skills that enable them to achieve socio-economic needs in their context and also intellectually and emotionally ready to join the job market either as employees or drivers of the economy if they become self-employed.

To ensure excellent and quality education, it is imperative for higher education institutions to uphold both internal and external quality assurance systems within all programmes they offer (Martin, 2016; Morgan Jobe, Kopona et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2016). Internal and external quality assurance systems are highly interrelated and also play a key role in supporting and improving the quality of educational

services provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). According to Cardoso, Rosa, Videira & Amaral (2019), Internal Quality Assurance falls within the jurisdiction of the Higher Education institution and has to do with internal policies and practices used by the HEIs to monitor and improve the quality of their education services. External Quality Assurance on the other hand falls under the mandate of the regulating body which assures the quality of HEIs and the programmes offered. Morgan et al., (2022) further highlight that, for quality education these should form an ecosystem as one cannot work without the other. For instance, whilst internal policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or the programmes within should ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes, they should also meet the standards that apply to higher education in general as regulated by the external quality assurer. Again, whilst it is the mandate of the regulating body to ensure that institutions and their programmes meet certain standards, the teaching and learning process within the institution, which is the content delivery rests within the jurisdiction of the institutional internal quality assurance systems, without which, the external authorisation and accreditation mechanisms would fail to bear fruits.

Absolute quality assurance, (affirming to both internal and external quality assurance systems) is therefore an ideal for all institutions (both private and public) which wish to offer quality education, with which there is no compromise (Morgan et al., (2022). This is an ideal situation where institutions lay significant emphasis on human capital production; hence, produce graduates who become intellectual leaders and path makers; that is, graduates who become part of the team of global solution generators rather than socio-economic "burdens".

However, despite countries and external quality assurers moving towards and prioritising issues of quality assurance in their educational systems and processes, there exist multidimensional barriers to internal quality assurance in higher education which hinder the effective implementation of quality assurance. This article highlights the need to investigate and understand such barriers as one of the means towards navigating them. The article also highlights ways in which higher education institutions can effectively tailor intervention strategies to mitigate such barriers.

The Octet of Quality in Higher Education
In tracing the barriers of effective, excellent and quality education in higher education, this paper is guided by Zaki and Rashidi's Octet of Quality in Higher Education (2013). According to the Octet quality framework, there are eight (8) important variables that drive or influence quality assurance in higher education. These are; the institutional leadership, curriculum, student's profile (which recognises the student as an important stakeholder in institution and also the quality assurance process), institutional design and strategy, institutional policies and practices, resources (financial, human and physical resources) faculty knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA). KSA has to do with referring mainly to the legislative environment and open system thinking and change (which is focused on the creation of learning organisations that are flexible and can adapt to the constantly changing environmental demands, as well as the industry (Zaki & Rashidi, 2013).

BARRIERS TO INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Drawing from Zaki and Rashidi's (2013) Octet of Quality in Higher Education, this article highlights the importance of institutional leadership, design, policies and practices, the curriculum, student's

profile, resources, faculty knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA), open system thinking and changes could drive quality education. On the other hand, if compromised and disregarded these have the propensity to act as barriers hence compromise and water down any efforts towards quality assurance in higher education.

Resources

According to Zaki and Rashidi (2013), financial, physical and human resources are important factors towards ensuring higher education that is of excellent quality. Disregarding and compromising on these can compromise the quality of education for any higher education institution. Zaki and Rashidi lament that, when considering quality education, institutions tend to neglect the issue of sufficient financial resources, yet it plays a huge role in the overall operation and success of the institution towards providing students with quality education. It is when financial resources are sufficient that institutions can also be in a position to have appropriate and relevant infrastructure such as buildings, with proper lighting, well equipped laboratories, libraries and appropriate furniture in each learning space. Without adequate financial resources, it is not possible to give proper quality of higher education services to students (Gulua, 2020).

On a similar note, having physical resources is not enough to ensure quality education, without adequate human resource in the form of academic staff, that is fairly distributed to all the offered programmes. Gregory and Lodge (2015) argue that academic workload is a silent barrier to quality education. That is, if lecturers in an institution are not enough for all the programs, and are not fairly distributed, teaching becomes a huge burden and an overwhelming load for the available academics. This, in many ways, make teaching and learning less effective at the same time compromising the quality of education. It is therefore imperative that institutions not only have the physical infrastructure, but also enough funds to cover the financial aspect of teaching and learning and also enough human resource to do the actual teaching.

The Curriculum

Osberg and Biesta (2021) define curriculum as the way in which educational events and every planned learning experience is organised. A curriculum entails all the objectives and outcomes, contents and credits, materials, assessments methods and audio-visual aids that are used to achieve institutional educational objectives (Zaki & Rashidi 2013). It is guided and framed within a set of values about what students should know and how they come to acquire that specific knowledge (Prideaux, 2003). For quality education, it is therefore a requirement that each discipline of the curriculum uses standard curriculum development models and approaches, in order to fulfil the national objectives, while addressing the local and international needs (Medrick, 2023). It is only through the right curriculum, that education can bring about the specific educational good", and at the same time "achieve its predefined normative ends (Osberg & Biesta, 2021, p. 61). For instance, it is important for institutions in their programme development stage to consider student diversity. That is, not only considering individual students' learning style, educational, cultural and social background and experience as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being, but also ensuring that every student is entitled to educational success despite these limiting factors (Gulua, 2020).

To ensure quality education, higher education institutions should also discard enforcing unsuitable academic systems and procedures that serve as bottlenecks (Kohn, 1993), in preference to educational systems that go beyond enabling students' access to the curriculum but those that also prioritises on educational success for all.

Faculty knowledge, skills and abilities

The quality of higher education is directly created by academic personnel (Lucky & Yusoff, 2015). This means, the overall success of an institution towards offering quality education is a manifestation of lecturer performance, knowledge, skills and abilities which then become the breadth of educational institutions (Toni, Gani, Nujum & Latif, 2015). Hence, low lecturer performance indicates poor quality of education offered to students. The correct selection of faculty members tends to result in the perfect implementation of all institutional processes and functions at the appropriate level. That is to say, faculty members should have the relevant qualifications, empowered with the right knowledge, skills and abilities to efficiently work in a higher education space, without which quality education cannot be attained. Giatman, Siswati, and Basri (2020) argue that, students' knowledge acquisition is largely dependent on how and what lecturers teach. On the same vein, how and what they teach is itself dependent on the knowledge, skills and commitment they bring to their teaching.

Faculty members who are not appropriately qualified can therefore mar quality education for any higher education institution. It is the educational institutions' responsibility therefore to find and foster competent lecturers. Those are lecturers who are mature in expertise and are ready and intellectually able to contribute to the nations' intellectual life by presenting graduates who have global insight, character, and internationally competitive (Anggraeni, 2014). Higher education institutions should therefore prioritise on hiring qualified staff for all their programmes. It would also be in the best interest of the institution to have faculty members who continuously upgrade and professionally develop themselves. This would enable them to remain relevant to the needs and demands of the society and industry, for the betterment of the students they teach. These academics are inclined to produce graduates that are well competent and well conversant with prevailing trends and environmental demands, hence perfectly fit into the industrial and job market space.

Open system thinking and change

Arthur and Kuranchie (2022) further point out that, faculty members' attitude, resistance to change, no motivation, innovation and fear of change can be a barrier to quality assurance. According to Zaki and Rashidi (2013), open system thinking and change has to do with learning institutions and the academic staff being flexible to adapt to change and intellectually embracing the constantly changing global, environmental and industrial demands (Zaki & Rashidi, 2013). This means, as the world develops and transitions, the lectures who bear the great responsibility of developing graduates who should be in a position to address the socio-economic, political and global problems, need to be in a position to confront and also help their students confront and embrace this change. For instance, this calls for academic staff to move from the conventional pedagogic approaches that hinder educational transformation and perpetuates the culture of stagnation, but rather be innovative and acquainted with the prevailing educational and technological trends of teaching and learning (Osberg and Biesta (2021).

Lecturers need to change their pedagogic styles from being devoted only to content delivery to incorporating total quality assurance trends into their teaching. This could enable them to develop graduates with "sufficient technical knowledge and skills to undertake their careers, along with the capacity to exhibit higher order thinking skills for solving myriad of complex problems emerging in the professional, social and economic spheres of life" (Zaki, Rashidi & Kazmi, 2013, p. 65). The starting point could be faculty members considering quality education as a key performance indicator in their work, understanding and recognising what constitutes quality teaching and learning, having the correct attitude to effect change but most importantly, be willing to play a role in ensuring it takes place in their institutions (Nguyen, 2016).

Considering that, institutions might not have the required expertise to train and develop the staff in order to align with global developments and also to bring about a positive and the much needed change in the classroom and outside the four walls of the classroom, Gulua (2020) advises that, institutions that value quality education should, as a matter of primacy, invest in their academic staff through institutional systematic and strategic training of all the employees to best align with the requirements of quality education and mandate of the institution.

The profiles of enrolled students
Zaki and Rashidi (2013) highlight that disregarding and not recognising students as important stakeholders in any educational institution could mar any prospects for quality education. This is because all institutional processes revolve around them and any decision made by those in power either benefits or compromise their educational success. In all their processes, practices and decisions, institutions should consider the multiple identities and personal experiences that students bring into the school context, and how these identities and past experiences act as basis for their learning. Students come to school with backgrounds relative to their family environment which influence their aptitude (language, reasoning, etc.) and attitude (motivation and others) necessary for learning (Fomba et al., 2022). Disregarding these factors would not only compromise the education of most students, but also make educational quality a far-fetched dream for most institutions (Morgan et al., (2022).

Such understanding would enable lecturers not only to understand diversity within their lecture rooms but also for them to design pedagogic practices in ways that could be inclusive as to accommodate and align every student to equitable success, despite their limiting life or academic experiences (Motsa, 2021). Institutional practices, teaching and learning should therefore be both deficit based and strengthen issues of equitability. That is, pedagogic practices should be designed in such a way as to meet every student at their point of need. This could help institutions to close opportunity gaps for students, deal with issues like poor performance and dropout rates whilst increasing academic engagement. In such a situation, every student is equitably empowered with fair encouragement of excellence (Zaki & Rashidi, 2013), professional and competent skills so as to fit into the job market and also contribute towards the growing national and international economy and social relations.

Institutional policies and practices
According to Matadi and Uleanya (2022), poorly developed policies and those that remain on paper with glaring disparities between policy and practise tend to be barrier to quality education for higher

education institutions. One way to ensure that institutional policies are excellently developed and implemented, higher education institutions need to re-define collegiality in their individual contexts as to engage and empower academic staff with regard to implementing quality policies (Whalley, 2017).

Matadi and Uleanya highlight that, institutional policies should not only be considered as a "framework and benchmark" to all institutions; be it private or public, but should also be aligned with and also guide practice. This calls for institutions to examine their existing systems and structures to realise the intentions expressed in all its policy documents (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2009). For instance, Whalley (2017) mentions that institutions that value quality education and aim to produce competent graduates should develop an institution-wide framework for teaching and learning that reflects the mission, values and specialties of the institution and defines the objectives of teaching and the expected learning outcomes for students. It should also ensure that all specific teaching and learning frameworks at department, school or programme level are consistent with the institution-wide framework and further align the teaching and learning process as well as student assessment to the teaching and learning framework (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

Institutional Design

Zaki and Rashidi (2013) point out that both the structural and contextual design of an institution have a huge influence on educational quality. The structural domain relates to the formalisation, specialisation, hierarchy of authority, centralisation and professionalism within an institution (Morgan et al., (2022). This includes the management, academic and non-academic members staff. Contextual design on the other hand has to do with the size, the environment, technology, learning space and goals of an institution (Zaki, Rashidi & Kazmi, 2013). Institutional design is concerned with the relevance and actual design of what is taught and learned and space within which it is taught, and also the people on whose responsibility quality and excellence in the institution is vested. That is, how all these are structured and designed to meet the prevailing and future needs of the students, also taking into account their subjective circumstances and perspectives (Fomba, Talla and Ningaye, 2022).

Effective institutional design towards educational quality in an institution would therefore consider and relate to "the quality and extent to which institutions can affect the inputs of education, the education system, or even the education process" (Fomba, Talla & Ningaye, 2022, p. 89). For instance, infrastructure must be designed in such a way as to serve the educational process and also improve the quality of the learning experience (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). There is also the heightened need for every institutional design to accommodate and consider the significant changes in the overall education system itself, the nature of the students, teachers, infrastructure and the institutional objectives, educational and technological technologies, and its socio-economic, cultural and political environment (Fomba, Talla & Ningaye, 2022). It is imperative for higher education institutions that wish to ensure quality education to design potent and efficient teaching and learning strategies. Considering these could effectively enhance the quality of education within higher education institutions and help them achieve the desired result.

Institutional leadership

Institutional leadership also has a huge influence on the quality of education. Connoly, James and Fertig (2017) point out that institutional leadership has to do with carrying out the responsibility of the proper functioning of the institution and influencing the people working within to achieve the institutional goals. It has to do with aligning people with the institutional vision as well as motivating and empowering them (Fatihma & Syahrani, 2022), and this becomes the institutional leader's responsibility. To ensure quality education, institutional leaders should therefore be able to articulate this vision, establish direction and develop change strategies (Leal Filho Eustachio, Caldana, 2020), otherwise the existence of the institution risks being eroded at the detriment of the student it seeks to serve.

For example, Fathima (2022) argues that authoritarian leadership should not be encouraged in institutions that wish to adopt quality and excellence. For the mere reason that such leadership create the feeling of oppression and the imposition of force, it stifles innovation and creates a rigid work atmosphere, immerse pressure for the lower level academics and on the administrative and other staff. Yet innovation and creativity are imperative in an educational institution that wishes to ensure quality and also align with environmental demands. A transformative leader on the other hand is credible, capable to bring change and also competent because of the huge responsibility of controlling the organisation (Fatihma, 2020). Transformative leaders possess certain administrative core values like creativity, vision, intelligence, initiative and honesty as these play a significant role towards university performance (Connoly, James & Fertig (2017). They are responsible, courageous, passionate and have the capacity to champion change and adopt a collaborative approach, frequently consult academics to gain the necessary support for the quality management initiatives (Drew, 2006). Without these valuable qualities, leaders can limit optimum university performance and these institutions would not be in a position to achieve their pre-set objective of being vital hubs for the production of quality human capital focusing on the achievement of individual, organizational and State goals (Leal Filho Eustachio, Caldana, 2020).

Conclusion

An appeal is made to private and public institutions to establish internal quality assurance units to lead and coordinate quality assurance initiatives in their respective institutions. The internal quality assurance units should endeavour to establish internal quality assurance systems that focus on the development of quality culture and put more emphasis on internal quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that there is internal accountability. Institutions should embark on self-evaluations on newly developed standards and interventions. Outcomes of their self-evaluations should guide them vantage to recognize matters on which reliable evidence could be collected, and be in a position to identify areas where improvements could be needed. There is great need also to support and enhance quality assurance units in higher education institutions to facilitate exchange of information on quality assurance and to develop systems for capacity development or improvement for academic staff.

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