

Quality Orientation in the University Communities in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretical perspective on the importance of quality assurance in higher education and how those that are charged with the mandate to promote quality in universities can create quality consciousness across the university community. Quality is broadly defined for a general understanding of the concept and contextually defined to illuminate its relevance to higher education. The multi-model approach by Cheng and Tam (1997) and Gibbs (2010) is adopted in defining quality of education. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: Whose responsibility is quality assurance in the university? Why is there a greater need for quality assurance in higher education? What are the benefits of implementing robust quality assurance (QA) systems in the university? How can quality consciousness be created in the university community? Finally, recommendations are proffered on some of the approaches universities can adopt to create a quality culture, which is envisaged to translate into quality academic provision.

Keywords: Higher Education Institution, Higher education, quality, quality orientation, quality culture, quality assurance.

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INTRODUCTION

The role played by higher education institutions (HEIs) in national development is unquestionable. Higher education institutions drive economic aspirations through research and development, thus making higher education institutions centres of innovation and development (Zgaga, 2011; Babatola, 2015). Over several decades ago, the focus in higher education has been on the provision of higher education and little attention was paid to the quality of education offered by institutions of higher learning. The emphasis on provision of higher education has seen a drastic increase in higher education institutions which is coupled with the mushrooming of diploma mill universities (Hallak and Poisson, 2007; Nganga, 2013). The mushrooming of such institutions forced many countries to establish higher education quality assurance bodies (Hallak and Poisson, 2007; Sharma, 2019). Globalization and internationalization have also put pressure on HEIs to produce quality services and products. The pressure is felt more by institutions with low recognition and infrastructure challenges. Under such circumstances, the only survival mode available to such institutions is quality consciousness through the creation of quality culture within an institution. Quality consciousness would help the institution to produce graduates who are capable of promoting national development, thereby improving the institution's recognition (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Thus quality assurance systems are therefore crucial in supporting higher education systems and improving their reputation at national, regional and global levels. It is through quality assurance systems that HEIs are able to timely respond to various needs and expectations of stakeholders. This means that HEIs need to set up robust quality assurance systems and create a quality conscious human environment thus making quality assurance a socially constructed domain. This would make the university community appreciate quality assurance as a collaborated process that should include all the stakeholders. The involvement of all stakeholders is likely to lead to the production of quality services and products thereby promoting the growth of HEIs. Quality awards also safeguard the students' interests and the community at large. With quality awards, there is a higher likelihood of graduate employability as the university graduates would also be empowered with critical hidden curriculum skills such as 21st century skills. These 21st century skills include citizenry, problem-solving and independent thinking, inter alia.

BACKGROUND TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Historically, quality has been a topic which was ordinarily popular in the manufacturing industry. This means that quality originated from the business world. The concept of quality started in 13th century in feudal Europe where craftsmen formed guilds that were responsible for inspecting the craft work to avoid taking deformed products to the customers. In the early 18th century, the manufacturing industry adapted the quality model that was used by the craftsmen and quality inspection were started by Great Britain industry in the 1750s. In the 19th century. The quality concepts spread to other parts of the world with America adapting the craftsmen quality concept that was shaped by production methods. With the advent of the industrial revolution, the factory system was adopted where quality was ensured through audits and inspection. The quality legislation was first enacted by the United States of America during the World War II which emphasised on quality and safety issues. Initially, quality was ensured by checking each product, which later became difficult to do with increased production as firms embarked on mass production. Later samples were used to ensure quality and this broadened the concept of quality as firms acknowledged the

need for training as a quality enhancing mechanism. Thus, employee training was emphasised as a means to improve the quality of the products.

In the early 20th century processes in quality practise were embedded in the quality management systems. This made quality being viewed as not only relevant to the final product but to the processes that lead to the finished goods (Shewart, 1967). After the World War II, in an effort to improve her products in the international market, Japan introduced the concept of total quality control in the 1940s. This concept saw a quality paradigm shift from product inspection to improving all organisational processes through people who used the processes. Given the enormous benefits of total quality control, most nations adopted the concept to improve their competitive advantage. Between 1980 and 1990s, quality control was broadened to total quality management. This broad spectrum of quality extended the quality concept to include strategies, programmes and techniques that ensure quality. Total quality management redefined quality to be customer focused, employee involvement, continuous improvement and infusion of quality into the whole organisation, thus making quality the responsibility of all stakeholders.

The 21st century saw new quality systems in place with non-business institutions such as higher education institutions embracing the concept of quality assurance in their operations. Different ISO standards have been developed to cater for different sectors as quality has moved beyond the manufacturing sector to other sectors such as government, health and education. The education sector is guided by ISO 21001:2018. From the ISO date, we can infer that quality in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon. This is because education was not originally provided as a business quality had been left to government education inspectors and professional credentials as well as to external inspectors such as councils for higher education (Martin & Thawabich, 2018). Given that quality in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon, preliminary research has shown that quality philosophy is not yet engrained in the higher education community. Other than being appreciated in higher education, it is important to note application of quality assurance in higher education is not as straight forward as it is in the product market (Broughton, 2018). This is because of the socio-economic development role of education at local, national and international levels. In addition, education is a transformative process that supports the growth of graduates who can make significant input to local communities, a broader society and to the economy at large (Gibbs, 2010). Given the complexity of quality assurance application in higher education, this paper seeks to highlight how higher education institutions may create a quality-oriented university community.

In Zimbabwe, following Zimbabwe's post-independence policy on education, much progress has been made in offering higher education. At independence in 1980, the country had only one university and several colleges. To date the country has thirteen state universities and seven private universities (ZIMCHE, 2019). The growth in the number of higher education institutions is the fulfilment of the government policy on education to all which was promulgated at independence. The policy was meant to get rid of education bottle necks that were created by the colonial regime where education was preserved for the minority whites, elite in the society. The growth in HEIs made it necessary for the government of Zimbabwe to call for quality assurance. Increase in the number of HEIs in Zimbabwe resulted in the reduction of average enrolment rate per institution thereby triggering competition for students, thus threatening higher education quality. Increased competition has resulted to commodification and commercialisation of higher education in the country. Due to reduced standards, the government of Zimbabwe stepped in to revive the quality of higher education. The move led to the birth of a quality assurance board. Thus, quality assurance was initiated in 2006 when the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established through the Council for Higher Education Act No 1 of 2006. The

Act empowered the Council to accredit all learning programmes in all Universities in Zimbabwe as the Higher Education regulatory authority. ZIMCHE in 2006 replaced the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) 1990. NCHE's mandate was to assess private universities' applications and recommend the approval of the private university charter to the minister without taking cognisance of quality of education provided. This means that NCHE was incapacitated to monitor quality in HEIs and there was need to formulate a new mandate for the quality assurance board. ZIMCHE was launched for effective setting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of quality standards at higher education institutions. To ensure effective implementation of quality standards, ZIMCHE in 2015, made it mandatory for institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe to set up quality assurance units which were meant to coordinate quality assurance efforts in every institution. This could be achieved by carrying out internal audits with an objective of helping institutions improve in their operations. If effectively executed, internal quality assurance systems may help universities improve their operations as it provides room for continuous improvement (Nilson 1997 in Garwe and Thondhlana, 2018). It is worth noting that achievement of quality standards at university level is a collaborative effort, thus the need for quality orientation of the whole university community.

DEFINITION OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the contemporary world, quality has become the utmost attribute that creates value of services being provided in the HEIs. Quality is a multi-faceted concept, hence a difficult term to define given that it has different meanings proffered by different people. Literature indicate that most scholars consider quality as 'fitness of purpose' (Harvey and Green, 1993; Walton; 1990; Vlasceanu et al, 2007; Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002). Some are of the opinion that quality is meeting set standards, specifications or exceeding customer expectation (Green, 1994; Cheng and Tam, 1997). All these definitions show that quality is all about ensuring that set standards, goals or procedures in the HEIs are achieved.

Aristotle is quoted as having said that "An examination of a knife would reveal that its distinctive quality is to cut and from this we can conclude that a good knife would be a knife a knife that cuts well." From this quotation, we can infer that quality is when the product is able to perform what it is expected to do. Attempts have been made to synthesise definitions of quality of education and Cheng and Tam (1997) came up with multiple definitions of quality which include achievement of goals, acquisition of resources, having adequate inputs, implementing effective processes, producing desired outputs and outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, satisfactory execution of legitimate mandate of an institution, absence of institutional problems and adopting and adapting best practices from other institutions as part of organisational learning. Their multi-model of defining quality of education are consistent with that of Gibbs (2010), who views quality of education as a multi-stage process which comprises of presage, processes and product, thus the 3P model. These definitions of quality in education mean that education is a complex venture which is comprised of many interacting quality dimensions. In his 3P model, Gibbs (2010), highlighted the interlinkage of processes in producing quality in higher education. Presage variables exist within the university, such as university resources (human resources such as the qualifications of the academic staff and non-human resources such as infrastructure in its various forms), quality of students enrolled and funding. Process variables include the actual delivery of a lecture, class size, quality of classrooms and laboratories, contact hours, general ambience of the learning facilities, quality of teaching, quality of research environment, level of intellectual challenge, level of student engagement, curriculum level, quality of formative

assessments and feedback and quality enhancement processes. Pereira (2002) also buttresses this argument by highlighting the need for quality teaching staff, academic programmes, high student enrolment, infrastructure and equipment and production and research. Hence, quality becomes the utmost trait that creates value for the stakeholder. Therefore, there is a great need for higher education institution's employees to be aware of the urgent need to enhance quality of service so that they shall produce high quality outcomes. Lastly, the product variables include student performance, retention, employability and graduate destinations. It is important to note that the key measure of product quality in higher education is not student performance, but educational gains. Qualifications and degree classifications may not be considered as a measure of quality in higher education as it is difficult to differentiate student quality across institutions (Yorke, 2009). In this case, educational gains are key in measuring higher education quality. Educational gains include knowledge and skills that promote employability and citizenship of higher education institution graduates. These gains are easier achieved by HEIs that are quality oriented. Thus, quality at higher education is not determined at a certain point like teaching, but it is embraced in the university processes, from the student admission process to the awarding of a qualification (graduation); making quality at higher education a university wide responsibility.

IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY ORIENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

Over the past three decades the higher education sector has witnessed rapid growth globally, with a continuous establishment of both state and private universities (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2018). This growth has not been without challenges. One of the major challenges with this rapid growth has been a compromise in the quality of academic provision in the higher education sector. This has prompted the need to maintain standards, improve accountability to various stakeholders, give students value for money and to improve employee and student morale and satisfaction. In the same way quality management systems have been used to improve efficiency and effectiveness in industry, quality assurance has become a necessity to make universities more accountable, efficient and effective in their work. Quality assurance has therefore become a useful strategy to enhance institutional efficiency, effectiveness, competitiveness and sustainability. Some of the major drivers of quality assurance in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe are; internationalisation, commodification, commercialisation, modernisation and competition.



Figure 1: Factors influencing the quality of higher education

Source: Authors' own diagram

Quality orientation in HEIs, though an emerging business philosophy, it is an important concept in most institutions given the alarming expansion of higher education and ever-changing customer preferences. Quality is perceived as a survival mantra in the face of stiff competition. For an institution of higher education to survive, quality assurance has to be seriously considered and pursued with maximum effort. Quality orientation is defined as behaviours and attributes that have an impact on quality of personal and interpersonal skills as employees interact among themselves and with customers. It also includes the organisation's attributes and commitment to continuously improve itself as it thrives to deliver quality services and products from the customers' perspectives (Javalgi et.al, 2005). Chiang and Birtch (2011) define quality orientation as conscious efforts of an organisation towards achieving high quality academic awards and research graduates that possess the 21st century skills. It is also generally defined as the understanding among institutional members about the importance of quality. From these definitions, we can infer that quality orientation is an important tactical resource of improving an educational institution.

Research has shown that quality orientation, coupled with systematic planning and monitoring offers numerous benefits to an institution (Wang and Wei, 2005). Quality orientation helps HEIs to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. It also helps the institution develop and maintain a sustainable quality-based advantage, thereby increasing business performance (Mehra, Jayal and Rhee, 2011). Quality orientation enables an organisation to change from passive to proactive culture which encourages all individuals to participate in institutional development initiatives and activities. If all institutional members embrace a quality philosophy, there is a greater likelihood that the institution will get a competitive superiority through customer satisfaction. In addition, operational costs are significantly reduced if employees appreciate the quality culture (Loukkola, 2010; Sonntag, 2018). This then makes quality orientation a prerogative of both management and employees thus the need to put in place robust quality assurance systems.

Implementing robust quality assurance systems comes with a myriad of benefits to various stakeholders across the university community. Some of the immediate benefits include increased quality of standards of academic provision; attracting more students; and the student community is guaranteed value for money for their investment in education (Ryan, 2015). Ultimately, industry and the community it serves benefit from innovative and cutting-edge problem solvers and solution providers who are graduates from the universities that implement robust QA systems (Gitta, 2014).

At institutional level, the implementation of robust QA systems facilitates quicker resolutions of problems, improves operational efficiency and effectiveness and increases reliability of university systems (Matei, 2016). The principle of continuous improvement which is characteristic of robust QA systems also ensures that there is constant review of stakeholder needs and expectations and consistent endeavour to improve university systems to meet these progressive stakeholder needs (Pavel, 2012; Seyfried, 2018). Increased customer confidence and satisfaction with university services become inevitable where the QA systems are consistently reviewed and enhanced (Garwe, 2014).

Communication among individuals and units within the university, and between the university and its external stakeholders progressively improves and becomes seamless over time. Robust QA systems facilitate the effective and efficient collection of data, its collation, analysis, interpretation and dissemination of information that supports well-informed management decision making (Machuchu, 2014). National, regional and international competitiveness of university programmes is guaranteed when there are effective and efficient quality assurance systems that ensure consistently high standards in academic

provision. It also follows that the graduates from such university systems compete well on the global market place (Butcher-Lashley, 2015; Ntshoe, 2010).

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS?

It is important to understand that quality assurance is a collective responsibility in higher education. In this regard, there is a great need for higher education institutions to orient its employees to embrace quality culture. This is called quality consciousness which involves every employee taking pride in his/her quality work. In this regard, every employee is expected to cuddle quality culture. Taner (2001) postulates that quality consciousness can be defined as employee awareness of the service or product they produce. This definition reflects that quality consciousness has become every employees' responsibility meaning that all staff members including the management have the mandate to work towards achieving a quality culture. In embracing quality culture the management is required to adopt sound quality university policies and effective training programs that would help enhance quality service delivery. Therefore, once institutional employees embrace quality culture; its vision, mission and values are likely to be met.

HOW TO CREATE QUALITY ORIENTATION IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES

Creating quality consciousness across the university community can be attained through various interventions. Training on quality assurance concepts and principles may be offered to all staff within the university so that they appreciate the value that can be derived from implementing quality assurance systems in university operations. Such training should inculcate a quality culture across the university community. Training would help the staff members to appreciate quality systems and activities that help produce high quality services and products. After being trained, staff members would be able understand the organization-wide approach to quality and also help members understand their contribution towards the achievement of quality service. When employees are trained, they are likely to be motivated to improve the productivity and quality of the products as employees would appreciate their role in quality assurance (Nidal, 2018). This means that quality orientation of employees has to be taken seriously by both employees and management as it is an important process, which might increase the cost of quality if not properly addressed.

Though training is likely to improve the appreciation of quality in HEIs, it is important to note that training programmes that are not focused on employee needs might be difficult to conduct (Singh, 2012). This means that HEIs may need to understand and appreciate employee needs and quality orientation nexus. Hence, if the needs of the employees are not met, it might be difficult to inculcate a quality-oriented mindset to employees. Training on quality orientation must first of all address the needs of the employees, or put emphasis on how quality would help the institution meet the needs of the employees. Quality orientation training should also coach employees to modify their attitudes and behaviour for them to be quality conscious. Additionally, training should focus on systematically changing the behaviour of employees towards achieving organizational goals. This should contribute to employee loyalty to the institution. Loyalty is developed if there is a congruence of employee goals with that of the organisation. This means the focus on training should be to increase the employees' commitment towards embracing quality.

Although training is usually assumed to help improve quality orientation, some researchers (Cook, 2008; Singh 2012) argue that it is still not yet clear how training would improve quality. Given their submission, it means that HEIs need to identify other means of enforcing quality orientation within the institution, such as rewarding processes that lead to quality service.

Quality consciousness can be attained through challenging staff across all departments to focus on continuous improvement of university systems. This could be in the form of reward systems that recognize and reward “quality champions” who demonstrate mastery of quality or develop innovations that transform and improve the quality of the university’s operations, products and services; new methods of teaching, new ways of delivering service, or new ways of carrying out certain university operations. Quality consciousness may be achieved through continuous benchmarking of university systems as staff go on study visits, and utilize contact and sabbatical leave.

Continuous personal development can contribute towards improvement of quality within the university. Universities should therefore promote and support continuous personal development as qualified and competent staff members are more prone to offer quality services and positively contribute to quality product development. Institutions can run quality assurance newsletters which promote institutional best practices. A quality culture may also be inculcated among the students who can be trained to take pride in the quality of their work; continuous assessment submissions, projects, practical assignments, research and final assessments. Joining associations of high performing and reputable universities and colleges in other countries is also a means through which quality consciousness may be attained within the university.

CONCLUSION

It is envisaged that through the various interventions discussed in this paper, the university community will understand and appreciate the value of quality assurance and consciousness in higher education. Quality Assurance has far reaching effects, among them positive institutional performance, quality graduates, improved institutional reputation, the impact of these quality graduates in the market place, positive contribution to industrialisation and modernisation, innovation, new product development, and continuous service quality improvement in their respective spheres of influence. The importance of implementing a robust QA system as a strategy for survival and sustainable growth cannot be overemphasized. Quality is everyone’s business across the university community and it is expected that all members should embrace a quality culture and make quality a way of life. Creating quality consciousness in the university community is therefore very critical and this could be achieved through continuous training and development, awareness campaigns, reward systems for positive reinforcement, running quality assurance and enhancement newsletters, and encouraging and supporting continuous professional development among other interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the conceptual importance of quality in Higher education, it is recommended that:

- Every university should have a Quality Assurance Unit/Directorate that champions promotion of quality at an institutional level. This will result in the formalisation and standardisation of quality assurance and enhancement. In addition, it will ease the

harmonisation initiatives that quality assurance practitioners are seized with globally. It will also create a central and focal point in each institution, though quality remains everyone's business across the university community

- For a quality culture to permeate through the university fabric, there is need for senior management buy-in and support. This is very important for effective implementation of various quality assurance and enhancement interventions.
- It is also important that adequate resources be allocated towards the promotion of quality within the university. Some of the interventions that require adequate resource allocation include training and development, distribution of material on quality assurance and enhancement, attendance to relevant workshops, seminars, and conferences for the purposes of networking, continuous professional development and knowledge sharing.
- Regular training and refresher courses on quality assurance for both teaching and non-teaching staff, and the students.
- Universities should regularly benchmark their programmes, teaching methods, and systems with other regional and international universities so that they keep abreast with the latest trends in their various areas of specialisation. Benchmarking also assists in keeping the competitive edge locally and globally.

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