

# **FOSTERING SUSTAINBLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **ABSTRACT**

According to the World Bank working paper no. 124, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is home to 740 million people. Although the number is increasing, Africa has 635 out of the world's 17,716 universities (3.6%). The gross tertiary enrollment ratio is about 5 percent, the lowest in the world. The current enrolments rates are the highest that Sub Saharan Africa has ever seen. It is hoped that these rates will continue to increase in spite of the fact that the budget allocation for education has been declining in most countries over the years. This coupled with the mushrooming of private provision of higher education and pressure from a rapidly transforming labor market have given rise to new concerns about quality.

One of the ways in which universities assure quality and acquire recognition in their home countries and abroad is through accreditation and certification. In addition, universities seek quality certifications so as to differentiate themselves from the many institutions that are offering degrees and diplomas which have become commodities in the market economy. Today, a number of universities are seeking and acquiring the ISO certification in Kenya. 3 out of the 7 public universities have received the ISO certification while one private university is certified.

Quality is fitness for purpose. John Henry Newman, states that university education implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character. It goes beyond providing information to the person to formation of the person. The ultimate aim university education then becomes integral human development. Quality certifications have had positive impact on the business performance of many entities. For instance they have lead to significant cost reductions, time saving and customer retention. However do these perceived benefits lead universities to achieving their true purpose and mission when they define and follow quality procedures? The certification procedures currently in use focus on the institution, the product it offers and the processes that are in place in the institution.

This paper seeks to examine the role played by quality assurance in university education, the purpose of higher education and the factors that could make accreditation ineffective. It ends by suggesting how this process could be improved.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The meaning of quality is to a large extent amorphous and contextual. It ranges from standard to excellence. Standards are the minimum requirements by which

performance is judged that is to say a set of norms referenced that are built upon what is expected. Excellence on the other hand is reaching the exclusiveness stage that is distinct from many others and stands out. It is achieving the highest level of satisfaction for stakeholders. From the above, the objective of every education institution should be to move from standard to excellence.

Mishra (2007) quotes Barrow's (1991) definition of quality in higher education:

*".....a high evaluation accorded to an educative process, where it has been demonstrated that, through the process, the students' educational development has been enhanced...not only have they achieved the particular objectives set for the course but, in doing so, they have also fulfilled the general educational aims of the autonomy, of the ability to participate in the reasoned discourse, of critical self evaluation and of coming to a proper awareness of the ultimate contingency of all thought and action"*<sup>1</sup>

Barnett views quality in higher education as a process of total quality care. Quality is an integrated approach to the management of quality. Barnett (1992) says that:

*"Quality in higher education demands the establishment of an institutional culture, not so much as a matter of total quality management but rather one of total quality care, in which each professional is seized of his or her responsibilities and takes care over all his or her own professional efforts."* <sup>2</sup>

According to Green and Harvey (1993), quality may be defined as exceeding standards (going beyond requirements and specifications), getting things right first time, fitness for purpose (based on customer satisfaction and is therefore subjective), value for money and as a transforming change. Watty (2003) as cited in Viktorias (2005) analyses Green and Harvey's definition and concludes that transformation is the most important dimension of quality because it is a qualitative change and education is about doing something to the student as opposed to doing something for him. Lomas (2001) concludes that transformation and fitness for purpose seem to be the two most appropriate definitions of quality in higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> Mishra, 2007 quality assurance in higher education, an introduction pg, 13

<sup>2</sup> Mishra, 2007 quality assurance in higher education, an introduction pg, 51

## TRANSFORMATION

St Thomas Aquinas defines quality as the accidental form which determines the subject to a special mode of being. He argues that things differ in degrees of quality. For example one may say that out of two paintings one is more beautiful than the other. So for these two objects, one has a greater degree of beauty than the other. This is referred to as degrees or graduation of a quality. From this fact Aquinas concluded that for any given quality (e.g. goodness, beauty, knowledge) there must be a perfect standard by which all such qualities are measured. In education then one could say that there are varying degrees of the quality and indeed there exists a standard that could be used to measure the quality of education. (source)

Today the intellectual world is quite poor principally because of the higher education systems that are being adopted in various parts of the world. University education has adopted a pragmatic approach with more emphasis on science and truth being considered to be only facts and evidence. Alder (1939) claimed that the imminent tragedy of the contemporary world is written in the fact that positivistic modern culture has magnified science and almost completely emancipated itself from wisdom. Scientific knowledge is in constant progress because of the nature of science but philosophy does not grow with an enlargement of experience as its data are always the same. The historical movement of science is a straight line ever upward. The historical movement of philosophy is a deepening spiral, in every turn of which the same truths and the same errors reappear.

The prevailing popular culture seeks to eliminate absolute values and criteria. Ideas run the world but these ideas come from somewhere. At a minimum university education must enable students to discipline reason and cultivate the intellect. Cultivation of the intellect is accomplished only through furnishing it with knowledge and wisdom, by acquainting it with truth, by giving it a mastery of ideas are not subject to the law of perpetual and interminable progress. As a consequence, concepts such as life, freedom, truth, conscience and human being have a stable application and are not used minimally and reduced to something narrow. Ideas are not forced on us by nature; we are not born with them. They can be shaped, molded and strengthened so as to acquire a sense of balance.

This then becomes the role of higher education; to train the mind such that the student understands and is in a position to cope with all the major aspects and questions of human existence, both personal and social; think more critically, more deeply, about the meaning of life, about its richer values such as truth, beauty, goodness, worship, friendship, love, marriage. For it is on the grasp of these values that genuine human fulfillment depends (Burke, 2001).

Alexander Havard (2007) urges that professional competence entails more than technical and academic knowledge. It is the capacity to use knowledge for some fruitful purpose. Martin Luther King dreamed of an America where man is judged not by the color of his skin by the content of his character. The same would be applied to education. It is not about the job that one finds after school but his character formation that should serve as the measure of quality education. Quality university education should create a deep seated desire for the quest of personal excellence that is the cultivation of virtue to be better people. The graduates, even after completion of university education must continually strive for excellence of being rather than excellence in doing.

Higher education should bring out the leadership potential in each student. This is based on the belief that leaders are not born but trained and that leadership excludes no one. Leadership is not for a few but for many because all students in fact can be prepared to be leaders in whatever place they might find themselves in the future. Leadership is a metaphor for centeredness congruity and balance in one's life. Centeredness, congruity and balance do not occur naturally but are acquired through effort. These characteristics can be shaped and molded at home and in school.

## **PURPOSE OF A UNIVERSITY**

The raging debate in most African countries is whether their tertiary institutions are fit for their purpose. Are African universities providing the education that the students, employers and society need? Scarcity of resources is an economic phenomenon for all countries but it is especially grave in Africa. This has led to the recognition by many African countries of the need for greater accountability for the use of scarce national resources. Therefore, no country wants to waste them on institutions that are not fulfilling their purpose. John Henry Newman defines the idea and the purpose of a university in the following words

*“-a University is a place of concourse whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge. You cannot have the best of every kind everywhere; you must go to some great city or emporium for it. There you have all the choicest productions of nature and art all together, which you find each I its own separate place elsewhere. All the riches of the land, and of the earth are carried thither; there are the best markets and there the best workmen. It is the trade centre supreme court of fashion, the umpire of the rival talents and the standard of things rare and precious. It is the place for seeing galleries of first rate pictures, and for hearing wonderful voices and performers transcend skills. It is the place for great preachers, great orators, great nobles, great statesmen.*

*In the nature of things greatness and unity go together; excellence implies a centre. It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find it's equal in some antagonist activity and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where enquiry is pushed forward and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind and knowledge with knowledge. It is the place where the professor becomes eloquent and is a missionary and preacher displaying his science in the most complete and most winning form pouring it forthwith the zeal of enthusiasm and lighting up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers. It is a place which wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affections of the middle aged by its beauty and rivets the fidelity of the old by its associations. It is the seat of wisdom, a light of the world, a minister of the faith, an Alma Mater of the rising generation".<sup>3</sup>*

According to Newman, the aim of the university is to teach people how to think critically and not just acquire knowledge. University education should serve to broaden the perspectives of the students by covering all aspects of life. University students should be taught to think more deeply about questions of human existence, the meaning of human life and concepts such as truth, unity, beauty and goodness. Without truth for instance people cannot be said to be free as they are incapable of making the right choices. Burke (2001) states that:

*"The purpose of university education was also to qualify the person to be able to face up to issues of right and wrong, justice and solidarity - which are at the heart of any real social progress".*

Over the years the true purpose of higher education has been lost. The focus today has been view university education as a stepping stone to achieving material wealth which is currently the measure of human success. The emphasis has shifted from the development of talents and potential to the acquisition of a skill that will later become instrumental in earning a salary. According to Burke (2005) this criterion is the driving force for many parents and students. However, it is one that leaves individuals and societies humanly underdeveloped and impoverished.

In discussing the quality of higher education it is important to ask ourselves what is higher in higher education? Is there more to it than the higher level of educational structure in a country? From a level perspective it involves tertiary institution learning aimed at helping students attain higher educational qualification. It provides students with in- depth knowledge about various domains and effectively leads them to know more and more about less and less. It broadens intellectual powers about a narrow perspective but gives a wider perspective about the world

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<sup>3</sup> Essays English and American, the idea of a university , 1854

around. University education should lead the students to have concern about what is happening around and in particular in society.

A university should offer individual the possibility of becoming what they are “an individual substance of a rational nature”. The aim of the university then is not to mass produce graduates but making each person going through the university a critical thinker while respecting his unique attributes. Then and only then can they be prepared to take up other duties in society. Otherwise people are viewed as factors of production that can produce immediate technological and economic results. According to A. Diaz (2008), if the education system is not aimed at making people fully human then certain aspects are left uncultivated. Then man is a utility “something that can make things” but cannot think.

If higher education is to provide solutions to the problems of society, a new humanistic synthesis needs to be incorporated in the purpose and mission of every higher institution. Universities are places where persons are formed not just professionals. We need profound and complete intellectual preparation and great levels of integrity. We need to equip men and women with the knowledge needed to solve the world’s problems but with the necessary values needed to sustain these solutions (John Paul II, 2002).

The term "development" may include economic development (in the sense of economic growth) but is by no means limited to growth in the economic dimension. Sustainable development is a people-centric process. Sustainable development is about the development of people today and the continued development of people in future generations. And it must be sustainable development of all people, i.e., all human beings, not just a few. Sustainable development is human development that is ecologically sustainable.<sup>4</sup> This captures the notion that human development is the cornerstone of sustainable development. Since integral human development cannot happen in isolation from other human beings, it follows that it requires integral community (social) development.

For universities to support sustainable development, they must promote integral human development. Integral human development is the “development of the whole man and of all men”<sup>5</sup>. It is the true development of man in all dimensions. Authentic development is complete. It is development of the person and “all of us” that is to say the person and all people. It is not the progress of an individual at the expense of the people around him. It involves “a free assumption of responsibility in

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<sup>4</sup> Luis T. Gutierrez, pelican Web Journal

<sup>5</sup> John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* (11 April 1963): AAS 55 (1963), 278.

solidarity on the part of everyone”<sup>6</sup>. The foundation of integral human development is the responsible use of personal freedom. Hence “each one remains whatever be these influences affecting him, the principal agent of his own success or failure.”<sup>7</sup>

Adler (1939) contends that schools are not turning out young people prepared for the high office and the duties of citizenship in a democratic republic. The educational system seems to produce all kinds of misfits, with higher-degree-holders who know a lot about some little thing and nothing about everything else. Public institutions cannot thrive or even survive, if universities do not produce a greater number of thinking citizens. African nations are at risk and nothing but radical reform of our universities can salvage the situation. A Diaz (2008) argues that human beings have basic needs that are not supplied by the present education systems. They need a deep humanistic formation, which enables them to understand themselves, the world in which they live.

### **WHY IS QUALITY ASSURANCE IMPORTANT?**

Quality Assurance is defined by the “International Organization for Standardization” (Kenya Bureau of Standards, 2000) as part of quality management system (QMS) focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled. Viktorias (2005) there are three main approaches to quality assurance namely accreditation, assessment and audit. Accreditation and assessment monitor the quality of teaching and learning, while audit focuses on internal procedures adopted by a higher education institution in order to achieve its objectives. The focus of this paper is quality audit also known as certifications. As cited in Woodhouse (1999) “ISO defines quality audit as a three-part process that involves; checking the suitability of the planned quality procedures in relation to the stated objectives; the conformity of the actual a quality activities with the plans; and the effectiveness of the activities in achieving the stated objectives”. Audit asks ‘are your processes effective?’ The output is a description of the extent to which the institution has conformed.

There is growing recognition particularly in Africa of the role of higher education institutions in steering economic growth. Tertiary education provides that human capacity and professional training needed for achieving the millennium development goals (MDGs). As a consequence, Africa has witnessed a mushrooming of these institutions but at the same time there is a widespread perception that educational quality is being compromised in the effort to expand enrollment in recent years. In addition, a new range of competences, such as adaptability, team work, communication skills, and the motivation for continual learning, have become

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, (29<sup>th</sup> June 2009) , 11

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, (29<sup>th</sup> June 2009) , 17

critical. In fact studies reveal that graduates need a unique portfolio of skills when they initially enter the job market and these skills are different from those that they need to retain the jobs (Mwiti et al, 2009). Thus, tertiary institutions are challenged to adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods to adapt to these new demands. In recognition of this challenge, greater attention is being focused on quality assurance as a critical factor to ensuring educational relevance. Strong quality assurance systems are then seen as critical in addressing today's challenges. (World Bank, 2002)

Due to the mushrooming of higher education institutions in every country, graduates from higher education institutions are competing in an environment that is shaped by local and national needs as well as international standards and expectations. Educational providers are then challenged to put in place mechanisms to monitor the standards which they set after reflecting on the unique history, needs and expectations of their stakeholders. Further, education institutions are competing among themselves for students and funds. The intensity of competition has been aggravated by globalization and other environmental changes specifically the current financial crisis. To survive, higher education institutions need to worry about quality and the way that they are perceived by the relevant stakeholders. Competition has further been aggravated by the increased diversity in higher education provision including the establishment of binary systems, and the growth in distance learning in many universities.

A number of factors have led to the decline in quality of higher education in Africa. Although there the enrollments have been increasing rapidly, the per units costs have been declining, the brain drain has lead to insufficient numbers of qualified academic staff in higher education institutions, low internal and external efficiency; and poor governance. Coupled with this there is rapid emergence of private providers in response to the increasing social demand for higher education, have prompted institutions and governments to put in place various forms of quality assurance mechanisms in an attempt to reverse the decline in quality and to regulate the new providers.

The ever increasing internationalisation of higher education including the growth in cross-border providers has created the demand for the mutual recognition of qualifications and higher education credits. This can only be achieved if the higher education institutions are assurance of the quality provided. There is increased awareness by customers about their rights and of the value derived from educational institutions. Customers are demanding good quality teaching which principally include transmission of employability skills. With this then, there is need to worry about the relevance of the courses and programmes offered to the market needs. In addition, other stakeholders such as government and the public also have certain expectations of higher education institutions.

High quality standards are seen to contribute to credibility, prestige and status. Consistency in addressing issues of quality leads to credibility of individuals and the institution. This positively contributes to brand value and status. In effect the image and visibility of the individual and institution are enhanced. Quality conscious institutions have the capacity to attract stakeholder support and to attract top students both national and international, donations and employability of its graduates.

If quality is fitness for purpose, is it possible for the quality certification process to capture the true purpose of university education i.e. integral human development? Can quality assurance systems help higher education institutions achieve sustainable development? Quality certification can help higher education institutions achieve integral human development only to a limited extent. Quality Assurance agencies are meant to promote quality and help to meet developmental needs of tertiary education providers. Sometimes higher education institutions see them as an end and not a means to improve quality. In addition assurance is viewed as evaluation, but then evaluation is about power. There is a strong temptation to build the systems in the higher education institution to serve agency's purpose and lose focus on the purpose of the institution.

The assurance standards and procedures tend to be too rigid or homogeneous. In addition to being too formal and having rigid standards, there is a strong focus on quantitative indicators. This makes it difficult for Higher Education Institutions to pay attention to the substantive, underlying issues. Assurance agencies need to recognize and validate different institutional models, and learn about the features that make them effective. Often times the quality assurance agencies prescribe a preferred way of doing things not realizing that Higher Education Institutions are different, and there are many different ways of achieving the desired outcome.

When Quality Assurance loses its learning capacity then there is no room for improvement. Higher Education is an essentially dynamic operation and its quality cannot be assured with a static process. Higher Education Institutions need to be able to revise the definition of quality, the criteria, the procedures, the mechanisms for self and external review, on the basis of experience and their own view of the purpose of the university. With the passage of time, things that have been learnt now need to be unlearnt because they no longer serve the purpose of the university.

There is a lot of insistence for Higher Education Institutions to comply with the procedures that are laid down. Compliance is sometimes mistaken for quality. Most Higher Education Institutions view it as a box ticking exercise whose main output is the number of compliances and non compliances. Some go to the extent of concluding that when there is less non compliance then the quality level has increased.

From the discussion above it is clear that quality assurance systems have positive effects on higher education institutions. Experience however shows that quality certifications on their own have lead higher education institutions to conform rather than seek improvement. Do quality certifications lead to anything more if all they do is to define and follow standards? Do they lead to the achievement of the integral human development of the students and staff? Are quality certifications about seeking empty efficiency with no higher purpose driving them? How can we use quality certification to humanize and not just produce outputs in a mechanized way? Do the procedures emphasized in ISO serve to humanize the institution? But is there a measure of humanization? What is clear is that it is important that universities go beyond the curriculum. In Kenya there are four universities with ISO certification awarded by KEBS. However none of these universities has demonstrated the role of the certification in achieving its mission. A review on research previously carried out led (Dick, 2000) to conclude that there is no proven link between quality certification (ISO 9000) and improved business performance.

## CONCLUSION

For higher education to truly contribute to sustainable development it is necessary that those running universities acquire an articulated vision of development. Where development is focused on

*“the goal of rescuing peoples, first and foremost, from hunger, deprivation, endemic diseases and illiteracy. From the economic point of view, this meant their active participation, on equal terms, in the international economic process; from the social point of view, it meant their evolution into educated societies marked by solidarity; from the political point of view, it meant the consolidation of democratic regimes capable of ensuring freedom and peace”<sup>8</sup>*

This understanding of what true development is will create the need to revise and specify institutional mission statements. Each Higher Education Institution has to determine its main actual functions aligning it to the true purpose of a university. Decisions made in the organization will have to be consistent with the adopted mission. A different approach to quality is needed. Quality and quality assurance are a call to improve the way in which things is done:

It is clear that one size fits all approach to quality assurance would not be suitable in light of the diversity of participants and regulatory issues in the education sector given the rapidly changing nature of the industry. There is a strong need to develop a different approach to quality. Quality and quality assurance processes have focused on the need to improve the way in which things are done: better academic

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21, loc. Cit. This vision of development is founded on Paul VI’s approach to the subject.

qualifications for teaching staff, stronger selection procedures for students, better laboratories, and improved teaching and evaluation strategies. Different things need to be done and in different ways: new modes of teaching, emphasis on growth in virtues, new types of programmes, new arrangements for part time students and part time academic staff, new alliances with external partners

There is need to take on an approach that promotes institutional capacity for self-regulation. In which case then there would be no need for external regulation and peer review. It must be carried out done by each Higher Education Institution. The role of an external agency would be focused on helping these institutions to improve themselves. This approach should promote and assess whether the Higher Education Institution has put in place specific procedures for ensuring that quality is maintained. This would require new ways of defining quality, adaptable to different circumstances. Promotion of institutional capacity for self regulation would demand clearly set goals that guide decision making at different institutional levels and policies and mechanisms consistent with purposes and goals. Links with assessment, planning and allocation of resources are also necessary. Vigorous and active accountability mechanisms are crucial in ensuring the success of the process. The old style models of self regulation of “set and forget “is not viable going forward.

If the current approach is retained we will continue to witness the mad rush by higher education institutions to get the ISO certification for the sake of good publicity. On the other hand, if the focus of universities is not the formation of character and teaching people how to think deeper and broader than they so far have then they will produce individuals who can do things but incapable of dealing with all the major aspects of human existence.

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