Conference Sub-Theme 3: Impact of QA and the Effects of External and Internal QA: Regional Perspectives to a Shared Issue

Topic: Challenges and Lessons Learnt from an Attempt to Help

Higher Education Institutions in Lesotho Activate and Strengthen their Internal Quality Assurance

Mechanisms

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Audio-visual requirements: Power Point Presentation

Abstract

When the Council on Higher Education (CHE) started its operations in Lesotho in July 2011, there was no quality assurance infrastructure, with the 13 institutions practicing externalization and moderation of examinations as the main quality assurance activities. This paper describes an intervention strategy that entailed helping institutions activate and strengthen their internal quality assurance mechanisms while nurturing the quality assurance culture in each context. Following the capacity-building workshop on quality assurance for representatives of higher education institutions, participants agreed to embark on a series of activities, including setting up quality assurance units and developing institutional quality assurance policies, systems and tools under the watchful of a consultant. This paper will describe the challenges encountered, the progress made, and the lessons learnt from this intervention. More importantly, the paper discusses implications of the findings for the sustained effort towards continuing to build the quality assurance culture in a context where quality assurance was initially non-existent.

An Outline of the Paper

Introduction

Founded by an Act of parliament in 2004 as a semi-autonomous organization reporting directly to the Minister of Education and Training, CHE started its current office in January 2010. During these early days the office spent a lot of time developing operational documents and policies while recruiting staff. Regulatory operations of the office such as the development of systems and tools really commenced in July 2011 with the appointment of Director Quality Assurance and Standards and Director Policy, Strategy and Information. The CHE mandate includes the following external quality assurance activities: Programme accreditation, registration of private

institutions and the auditing of higher education institutions. A major challenge facing CHE was that it was preparing to implement quality assurance in a context where both the quality assurance culture and quality assurance infrastructure were virtually non-existent. Whereas 10 of the 13 higher education institutions that were identifiable at this time described quality assurance in terms of moderation and externalization of examinations, only 3 institutions reported some contact with external quality assurance bodies (CHE, 2011). Notably all the 13 institutions had no systems, processes and the infrastructure needed to provide high quality services as evidenced by the Survey conducted by CHE (CHE, 2012). In fact, none of the 13 higher education institutions had either a written quality assurance policy or an administrative structure looking after quality assurance or quality assurance system and tools. There was need therefore to think about an intervention designed to build a quality culture within the institutions in preparation for external quality assurance activities such as programme accreditation.

Methodology

In order to remedy the situation described in the foregoing paragraph, CHE designed and implemented an intervention strategy that entailed working with institutions to build the quality assurance culture and infrastructure by providing technical support to the institutions as they activated and strengthened their internal quality assurance structures, mechanisms and tools in preparation for external quality assurance activities. This approach was premised on the assumption that building a national quality assurance culture is a very complex and multifaceted process whose success is contingent upon the progress made at the institutional level.

The intervention commenced with a capacity-building workshop led by a quality assurance consultant in February 2012 and touching on a number of quality assurance issues designed for representatives of the 13 higher education institutions. Following this workshop, participants agreed to embark on a number post-work activities to be implemented within each institution, including sensitization of institutional communities on the need for quality assurance, development of institutional quality assurance policy documents, setting up of institutional quality structures, development of institutional quality assurance tools, including quality criteria and self-evaluation tools. Additionally, each institution was to embark on a pilot self-evaluation exercise focused on one programme. During the mid-term review meeting held at the end of May 2012, representatives of the institutions reported about the progress and challenges they were facing as they pursued post-workshop activities. The consultant provided support by making suggestions on how to move forward in each context. The final reporting period for the project was held early November 2012. With the support of the consultant, CHE documented this process while providing support to the institutions throughout the project period. The sources of data included field notes, institutional reports, and report by the consultants. The data was analyzed using qualitative methods of data analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

It was found that the institutions had made varying degrees of progress in implementing post-capacity building workshop activities. Notably, smaller private institutions were found to have made greater progress compared to the larger public higher education institutions towards pursuing these activities. Other institutional challenges included lack of capacity to perform a number of technical tasks such as development of institutional quality assurance policies and quality assessment tools. Furthermore, other constraints were more contextual and seemed to emerge from a very abnormal institutional governance set up in which a number of public institutions remain departments of government ministries, enjoying little or no institutional autonomy.

Contrary to expectations, a more serious challenge, however, entailed the apparent lack of buy-in from key personnel, especially those in the management of some of the institutions. We had expected management of all institutions to fully embrace the idea of building a quality culture within each institution by providing support to those participating in the CHE quality assurance activities. Additionally, we expected resistance from the teaching staff and support staff who had worked for long time with scant regard for quality assurance issues. This paper will discuss the general implications of these findings and tease out some lessons that CHE Lesotho has drawn from this intervention as it continues explore the strategies of building and sustaining a quality culture across higher education institutions in Lesotho.

References

CHE (2011). Report of the Baseline Survey of Higher Education Institutions in Lesotho. Maseru, Lesotho: Council on Higher Education.

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