

Developing a Regional Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in East Africa: Progress and Experiences

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Abstract

The paper gives an overview on the initiative of introducing a regional quality assurance (QA) framework for the East African higher education under the auspices of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK). The initiative, which also involved the National Commissions/Councils of Higher Education of the East African Community (EAC) Partner States of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda was carried out through capacity building training of staff of universities on program and institutional internal and external assessment. The major output include the development of an East African Quality Assurance Handbook, which was piloted on internal and external program assessment. Consequently, this has led to the development of subject benchmark standards and an East African Qualifications Framework, both of which are contributing significantly into the regional agenda on harmonization of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) is a strategic institution of the East African Community (EAC) responsible for the development and coordination of higher education and research in the region. EAC considers higher education as critical for the attainment of socio-economic development and regional integration, and as such after having been recognized as the surviving institution of the former Community responsible for coordinating the networking of university institutions in the region, IUCEA has assumed a broader role as a building block for the achievement of sustainable socio-economic development and regional integration.

Since 2000, IUCEA has been carrying out reforms to respond to the EAC integration agenda. One of the key reforms included the need to establish an appropriate environment for harmonization of higher education systems so as to promote the EAC regional integration agenda as envisioned in the Common Market Protocol. Among the important steps towards harmonization of higher education in the region is the setting up of a regional quality assurance system for universities that was initiated in 2006. The initiative aimed at harmonizing regional quality assurance by establishing common East African quality assurance framework, establish regional quality assurance office at the IUCEA Secretariat, set regional higher education benchmark quality standards based on internationally recognized standards, prepare a use-friendly quality assurance handbook based on existing national benchmark standards and systems, and streamline national and institutional quality assurance systems according to the local perspectives. It is also aimed at promoting international competitiveness of universities in East Africa.

The Initiative to Develop a Regional Quality Assurance System

In developing the regional quality assurance system in higher education in East Africa, IUCEA with the support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the

Germany Rectors' Conference (HRK). The initiative was commenced through a consultative process involving Permanent Secretaries and other senior officials from Ministries responsible for Higher Education in the Partner States, national commissions and councils for higher education, namely the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) of Kenya, National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) of Uganda, and the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) in Tanzania, and universities. Later on the National Council for Higher Education of Burundi and the Council for Higher Education of Rwanda joined the initiative after the two countries were admitted as members of the EAC.

Strategies and Activities

The initiative involves establishment of appropriate guidelines, procedures and standards, including benchmarks for academic programmes. It also focuses on capacity building through providing appropriate training on the implementation of the quality assurance system to staff in universities and national commissions and councils for higher education in the EAC Partner States. The initiative is also linked to the establishment of a regional qualifications framework, whose development is already in progress. The regional qualifications framework will articulate harmonization of education and training systems, and qualifications thereby clearly indicating the programme learning outcomes, the different qualification levels, credit system and recognition of prior learning, among others. Hence, the framework will easily facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications across the region as envisioned in the EAC Common Market Protocol. All these interventions are aimed at transforming East Africa into a common higher education area, as the ultimate goal of the Community.

The Process

The process involved a number of consultative meetings and workshops at country and regional level, aimed at building consensus and to map out a strategy on how to establish a regional quality assurance framework, including development of an operational tool in the form of a Quality Assurance Handbook. The consultative forums were also aimed at ensuring that all performance indicators and quality benchmarks were agreed upon and owned by all end-user institutions.

A key performance in this process involved preparation of the Quality Assurance Handbook titled "Roadmap to Quality". The Handbook is now in use by universities and commissions/councils of higher education in carrying out internal and external assessment at programme and institutional level. The Handbook consists of 4 volumes: Volume 1: Guidelines for Self-assessment at program level; Volume 2: Guidelines for external; Volume 3: Guidelines for Self-assessment at institutional level; Volume 4: The implementation of a Quality Assurance system.

Achievement and Impact

The initiative has so far trained 57 QA Officers and 52 External Reviewers (Peers); 47 universities conducted Self-Evaluations and submitted SAR; Peer reviews were carried at 45 universities; many universities have adopted QA policies and established QA Units; quality improvement plans are used to enhance quality of programmes; most universities visited by East African/ German team for monitoring and QA Unit has been established at IUCEA. A Currently, IUCEA is carrying out training of a new batch of 24 university quality assurance officers. The training which commenced in June 2012 will run for about 12 months till June 2013.

Lessons Learnt

The lessons learnt are that it is very important and foremost to create an interface of politicians and university management in developing a QA strategic plan. It is also important to bring in top university managers and the middle level and continuously keep them informed and interact. There is also a need for jointly lobbying for funds to assure the necessary funding and staffing in time. It is also very important to integrate international experts, practitioners and change agents from both regions (and beyond) into an international training and consultancy team and work with the same people throughout the project.

Challenges

Challenges encountered during implementation of the initiative included resistance among some staff, students and management, QA personnel assigned other responsibilities, Inadequate funding, heavy teaching and administrative workload, quick turn over among students and staff, and Slow progress in establishment of Quality assurance policy and QA units.

Conclusions

As conclusions from an East African Perspective it is observable that the project has strengthened human capacity in QA in East Africa; contributed to establishing structures similar to the ones in Germany/Europe (thus easing co-operation between institutions); fostered regional integration in East Africa; and has given East African universities a head start and a pioneer role in the African context in QA.