Ugandan Universities:
The Challenge of Quality*

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Uganda has a growing number of universities, public and private, and people may ask "where do I send my children for a good university education?" What the parents want is the best for their children, no doubt about it, and it is up to the National Council for Higher Education to make sure that standards are kept and the expectations of parents are met. Of course, no one will dispute the fact that the council cannot work in isolation and needs the full support of each university to implement and achieve the standards it is setting for them.

Our society is changing all the time and one cannot ignore the fact that relations between societies, the world over, have an impact on each and every society. Uganda is no exception and one should not think that we can go it alone. It will be the degree at which we try to keep abreast with changes in the world, they not be

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countries and regions of the world, and thus vouch for an approach to education which might be different but adapted to the needs of the country.

This paper tackles some challenges facing higher education and more specifically the one of quality in the universities. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK states in its guidelines on standards that:

Academic standards are a way of describing the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning oppornmities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning oppormnities are provided for them.i

This description can be taken as true for Uganda as well and it is with this in mind that I choose to highlight a few points relating to quality in higher education, namely "making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them."

When people talk about quality assurance (QA), they often mean something which it is not or something it should not be. For example, to say that QA stands for a better life of the members employed by higher institutions or that QA stands for material standards of an infrastructure are partly true but very incomplete as we shall see.

In the Uganda context, some people believe that "the NCHE can veto operations, or even stop an institution operating", but this vetoing or stopping operations is not QA. However, it is because of the lack of quality that the NCHE has been set up to intervene and act. Still, others say that quality is a concept, which does not apply to Africa, as very often, we do not have the means to run our universities to international standards.

None of these approaches is correct and I would like to address a few issues, which touch on this important, perhaps central, component of higher education.

In a recent book published by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and Universities in the UK, Robin Middlehurst and Carolyn Campbell state:

Quality assurance is an important part of academic professionalism. It is also a key mechanism for building institutional reputation or brand in a competitive local and global arena and a necessary foundation for consumer protection. Across the world, it is part of the armoury used by governments to increase, widen or control participation in the face of rising demand for higher education as a public good or tradable commodity. Quality assurance is also fundamental to the security of qualifications and the mobility of professionals.

Without effective and appropriate quality assurance policies and practices, aspirations towards knowledge economies, lifelong learning, community development and social inclusion cannot be fully realised. It is for these reasons that quality assurance is receiving increasing attention at all levels.[2]

The importance of quality assurance for higher education cannot be in doubt. I will, therefore, address the question of higher education in Africa, its position in the world, and its future. When talking about higher education, I will limit myself to universities but what I will say can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to other institutions of higher learning. Second, I will attempt to give some ideas on QA in the context of African higher education by asking: Is it relevant? Is it necessary? Is it attainable?

Higher Education in Africa, its position in the world and its future

Dr Mala Singh has ably spelt out the basic elements for quality assurance in an international context. One thing which strikes me is that we now talk of QA in an "international context". No longer can we limit ourselves to a view where we are satisfied with what we have and what we do. No longer can we rest and say "well done faithful servant"! Too many factors are entering into play in our increasingly globalised world, factors that have an impact on what we mean by QA. Thus, the understanding of what QA is becomes an important question and to answer it necessitates that we look briefly at the situation of higher education in Africa before attempting to give

some guidelines and ideas.

Since the time of independence of African states, (here I am not speaking about South Africa as the system of higher education is vastly different,) higher education has seen vast changes. First, universities were nationalised or considered as national universities and thus national property. Governments took the lead and fully subsidised these institutions. But over the years, we have seen a slump in the growth and life of these institutions. Moreover, as time went on, governments tried to disassociate themselves from their universities mainly for economic reasons, and we have seen a drop in the subsidies granted to them. Having been used to receiving everything from government, in many cases not much effort was made in relation to the maintenance and life of such institutions. Over the last forty years, the political situation in most African countries has not been conducive to the growth and development of institutions of higher learning. When I look at the situation of public institutions in the late eighties (Makerere hailed once as one of the best universities in Africa), I must admit that the situation was pitiful: Staff were underpaid or not paid, the infrastructure was decaying, students were not taught, libraries were empty. Thankfully we are now seeing positive changes.

It was in these circumstances that a move was made by private individuals or institutions to give an impetus to university institutions by creating new ones, be they for profit or not for-profit. This renewed phenomenon can be observed all across the African continent and the mid-eighties saw, as it were ,a boom in higher education in Africa. From state-run institutions having a monopoly we have seen a real explosion of private institutions, which can be graded from very poor to very good.

The issue at stake is the objective, whether hidden or known. My ideas and views on this topic are known but let me say briefly that placing economic concerns before educational concerns will not give any assurance for quality in higher education. There must be a commitment to education by private universities

before we can begin to talk of profit. It is a well-known fact that education is not, in itself, a "business" but can be turned into one if we divert it from its objectives. What has to be considered is the outcome of higher education. African universities are no longer, as they were in the sixties and seventies, on the world scene but it is my belief that we should work to regain our rightful place there. I believe that Africa has the necessary strength and human-power to be at the top, but the question is "do we want to be there?" Lamenting and saying we cannot reach the top does not help at all: we have to look at what can be done. So how can we improve the situation ourselves?

There is a future for higher education in Africa on condition that all partners are convinced that education is a priority and remains so. My little experience has shown that by working hard to attain good standards in education, one attracts the attention of others and thus creates an environment where one is accepted, received, and respected. The outcome of our work, our graduates, are and will always be the passport which will take our institutions on to the international scene. It is our own task, not the task of others, to achieve results. Once we have created a firm foundation, partnerships will bring in better means to do our work. But the contrary does not work: it is not by asking others, and then perhaps doing something, that we will achieve positive results.

This is precisely where quality assurance comes in. In the first place QA has to be both from within and from the outside because there is no better judge about the work we do than the others who are in the same work environment, than ourselves. Also, the ones who will benefit from our work, employers and others, will be able to judge our work by our fruits. It is a fact that employers will not hire young men and women if they cannot perform well in the job market. Thus, what our graduates do and how they perform will be one way to recognise the quality of our institutions.

QA is also important within the institution. In practical terms, this means that peer review

and review boards are important. We should not consider these as infringements of the academic freedom of individuals, although they are often seen as such. Young academics have to learn to be guided by their elders and thus improve on what they do. Over the last thirty years I have worked in academic circles, I have known lecturers who never opened a book or wrote an article, but who contented themselves to dictate notes they themselves took as students year after year. No wonder students complain about the irrelevance of the imparting of knowledge by some of our lecturers. In my view such individuals should be moved out. of academia because they do more harm than good to our institutions of higher learning.

QA is also from the outside and the world over we have institutions whose role it is to keep an eye on quality in higher education. Such organisations can assist our institutions in their growth and help them to strengthen themselves. There are so many factors that influence the development of higher education and which will impact on it to foster change. These have to be monitored and constantly updated, guidelines have to be given to all institutions of higher learning. The context in which we work, and indeed the way we work, is changing so rapidly that we must keep abreast with everything in order to adopt policies to meet the changing circumstances of our world. As Middlehrust and Campbell note:

> Borderless higher education is driven by factors that reflect wider economic, social and political trends. These include developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs), the growth of knowledge-driven economies, globalisation trends and requirements for\lifelong learning. Such developments affect all sectors and countries, albeit in different ways.

In addition, Newman and Couturier, note four trends that appear to be affecting higher education across the world:
- expanding enrolments (accompanied by shifts in student needs and expectations);
- the growth of new competitors, virtual education and consortia within the operating

spheres of traditional higher education providers and provision;

- the global activity of many institutions; and
- the tendency for policy makers to use market forces as levers for change in higher education.'

Thus, fundamental socio-economic drivers and the specific trends outlined above have consequences for quality assurance both practically and politically.

Most countries in the world have an agency or body that controls quality in higher education. In Uganda, the NCHE is charged with this duty and it is important that all parties involved in higher education collaborate with the council to improve the delivery of educational materials. The broad aim of the council is to be a regulatory agency which aims at helping institutions, both young and old, to achieve the best possible results in academia. There is no doubt in my mind that the role of the NCHE is vitally important and has to be supported by all stakeholders in higher education. But the council has to take into account the circumstances in which it is working and propose a course of action which will be people-oriented and, at the same time, aim at constant growth in education. "Quality assurance arrangements must also act as insurance, if not a guarantee, of the present and continuing value of educational investments".[4]

It is precisely here that there may be some confusion regarding the role of the NCHE in Uganda. Its aim is not to curtail activities of an academic nature but to ensure that educational work remains quality work. Therefore, it is imperative that rules and regulations be put together and implemented to ensure the future of the higher education sector. I would go as far as to say that the future for higher education in Africa is bleak if institutions do not take advantage of the assistance of quality assurance agencies. Education at the level we are talking about is not the privilege of a few, even well intentioned people, but is part and parcel of the world and society we are living in. The future of our nation rests strongly on the quality of

the outcome of what is done at the higher level in education. In my view, it is now time that the role of regulatory agencies be considered seriously.

Without quality control, high standards will not be achieved. Those of us who demand quality in other services should also demand quality in education services; our sons and daughters deserve no less.

Quality Assurance in the context of African Higher Education: Is it relevant, is it necessary, is it attainable?

Some people may find it difficult to believe that QA is an important factor in the growth of higher education. Indeed, given the circumstances in which higher education functions today, some of us are tempted to say: why bother us with rules and regulations, when we even do not have the minimum structures in place to do a good job! I agree that the conditions under which we work are sometimes difficult and the exodus of qualified people to greener pastures is a sad reality. Salaries are low, incentives are few, and assistance to the development of higher education is of a very low level. But even under such difficult circumstances, I do not believe we should sit back and do nothing to improve the situation. Indeed, we are in a changing world and more and more opportunities are being offered to make higher education a sector where people will want to work.

However, it is a fact that QA has to be understood in the context of each country, taking into account the country's legislative and regulatory framework. And when this is done QA can be a powerful means through which higher education is on the move upwards but only if it is the concerted effort of all players.

Given the fact that African higher education is relatively young compared to other parts of the world, there is a culture of work which has to be established in the world of higher education.

Institutions themselves have to put in place mechanisms which will ensure that academics

in an environment which is conducive to good performance. This means that increased means have to be found through which individuals receive satisfactory benefits for their work. Perhaps a system of performance-related pay has to be found which will ensure that academics are motivated to give quality education to the future leaders of our country. It is precisely because of this that QA is relevant and important for African institutions of higher education. Once again I quote Middlehurst and Campbell:

> At the top of the hierarchy, statutes and laws provide a general direction for quality assurance, in terms of legislation on human rights, discrimination, employment practices or health and safety. Legislation will also in most countries and states, set out the formal powers of institutions and the regulatory framework which guides their governance and operations. Charters are another formal mechanism through which these powers are granted. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy as well as the awarding of degrees are often key aspects of legislation and charters. The legal framework may also establish the role and powers of those agencies charged with monitoring the exercise of institutions' powers (such as accreditation or quality assurance agencies). The awarding of degrees and diplomas, the use of public funds and increasingly, consumer protection and information, are central concerns in most regulatory frameworks. In many countries, the development of intellectual, economic, social and cultural capital is also formally addressed. The legal position and powers of institutions differ across countries, as do regulatory frameworks.5

These observations give us a good idea of the importance and relevance of QA. Our educational systems in Africa have to find their rightful place on the world scene and we have to work hard to be at par, and even to surpass others in quality of work and delivery of results. I am convinced that if we can achieve high standards, despite the constraints we all currently face, other institutions will approach us to create links for collaboration which, in the long run, place our institutions at a level where the conditions of work are improved.

Thus, QA is not only a relevant addition to higher education, it is absolutely necessary because without it we will be marginalised and few will be interested in real collaboration with us. In a globalised world where barriers and frontiers seem to melt away, we cannot sit back and ignore the trends of the day. Without becoming slaves to present-day trends, we now have to evaluate how fa we can be positive contributors to real quality in education in Africa.

To achieve this, help in needed. National councils for higher education, commissions for higher education, quality assurance agencies and so on are the primary means of helping institutions achieving higher standards. These agencies should not be seen as the enemy, even though their measures can seem too harsh, but rather as the arm of education which advises and assists.

Given the fact that they have legal status, their role is not only advisory but is also regulatory in that they impose certain rules in order to assist institutions and guarantee quality education. Here I cannot (and this is not the place to do so) explain what assistance to quality assurance means and comprises. But let me say that recommendations by QA agencies can sometimes appear harsh and threatening, not only in Africa but all over the world. None of us likes to be told that we are not doing a good job by such agencies. Their main role is to ensure that the objectives laid down by all academic institutions are truly geared towards the client, that is: the student.

In Uganda, the NCHE has laid down very strict rules and requirements for institutions to obtain a charter and provisions are made so that the Council can inspect institutions, even after the granting of a charter, to ensure that quality is being maintained. Such measures can only result in better qualified graduates. I do not have to elaborate further on all the consequences of producing well-trained young people in Africa today. In our world today we can no longer ignore the fact that we are part

of a global village. More and more agencies are collaborating and it is, therefore, important that we in Africa join hands. The world job market is no longer reserved for a few, and more and more young graduates are travelling the world looking for employment. We have a duty in Africa to see to it that these young graduates go with a degree which is valuable and will open doors for them. At the same time, we will attract people from other continents to our universities if we provide relevant quality education. This is not a game, it is a question of survival.

In my view the real solution is the setting up of international standards which will help all of us in our quest for quality. This does not take away from national agencies and their work, but more and more the need for cross-border activities is calling for international rules and regulations to ensure that those dealing with higher education are not working in isolation but are working for the good of their own people and of all those who want to join higher education institutions. For instance, it could be possible for the NCHE in Uganda to accredit an institution from another country? This could go a long way to opening frontiers and leading to better.

But let us not think that all this will happen immediately and quickly. Quality education that leads to international recognition will take some time to achieve, especially if we on the African continent are working alone, distanced from the international scene. This is precisely why I advocate more and more contacts between nations so as to create a pool of academics who are willing to contribute to higher education in places other than their own, thus adding a further invaluable aspect to higher education. It is time that we transcend our fears of being "poisoned" by outsiders and open our doors to collaboration at the international level.

Conclusion

What can I say at this point? I know that so much has still to be done and sometimes one wonders where to start. However, the experience of other countries, especially in Africa, shows that achieving real sustainable quality on higher education is not all an uphill task. To begin though, we should first accept the point that QA agencies are a must. Second, we have to admit that these agencies have a regulatory role to play and their decisions and recommendations should be accepted, even ii difficult, and implemented. In addition, political interference should not be a factor although we are aware that this is a problem in many countries. Thus, the independence of these agencies has to be guaranteed by law, if really we want to achieve measurable results. Third, institutions in Africa should play an "honest game".

Here again I make reference to Middlehurst and Campbell:

> The quality assurance of transnational education may in certain circumstances be less a pressing issue than the control of indigenous private provision. Indeed the two are often confused, especially where local institutions are operating with foreign sounding names. There are promising signs that some of the providers of transnational education are increasingly aware of their respo0

Notes

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1 Robin Middlehurst and Carolyn Campbell in "Quality Assurance and Borderless Higher Education: Finding Pathways through the Maze" in *Mapping Borderless Higher Education. Policy, Markets and Competition,* ACU Publications London, 2004: 90-91.

2 Newman and Couturier, T*rading Public Good in Higher Education Market,* London, Observatory on Higher Education: 90-91.

3 Middlehurst and Campbell, op. cit, p. 91.

4 Middlehurst and Campbell, op.cit, p.91.

5 Mddlehurst and Campbell, op. cit., p. 99-100.

6 Mddlehurst and Campbell, op. cit., p. 146-147.