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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 to introduce a quality assurance system for higher education in East Africa by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) in collaboration with the national commissions and councils for higher education in the East African Community (EAC) Partner States (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda), and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK). The initiative is implemented through training of universities staff on the use of the quality assurance instruments that have been developed and published in a handbook, which is based on the national systems and international practices for carrying out internal and external evaluation. The training sessions are in the form of a hands-on process focusing on the use of the quality assurance handbook, through pilot self-evaluation and external peer review, both of which were at program level. The pilot process is guiding the development of benchmark standards for programs and an East African Qualifications Framework for higher education, both of which are required as part of inputs towards harmonization of higher education in East Africa. The paper gives highlights on the achievements made in this initiative focused on experiences, and also discusses challenges and the future outlook with respect to the quality assurance system being introduced in East Africa.

Introduction

As an East African Community (EAC) institution, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has a mission that focuses on the promotion of strategic and sustainable development of higher education systems and research for supporting East Africa's socio-economic development and regional integration. Its vision is to become an EAC strategic institution responsible for promoting, developing and coordinating human resources development and research in the region. It is a membership institution for both public and private universities, university colleges or other degree-granting institution in EAC Partner States (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). Currently, there are 96 member university institutions from all the Partner States. The objectives of IUCEA are to facilitate networking among universities in East Africa, and with universities outside the region; providing a forum for discussion on a wide range of academic and other matters relating to higher education in East Africa; and facilitating the maintenance of internationally comparable higher education standards in East Africa so as to promote the region's competitiveness. The functions of IUCEA include advising the EAC Partner States on higher education matters so as to contribute to meeting national and regional developmental needs, coordinating inter-university cooperation in East Africa, facilitating the strategic development of member universities, and promoting internationally comparable higher education standards and systems for sustainable regional development.

Objectives to Develop a Regional Quality Assurance System

As one of the objectives of IUCEA is to maintain high and comparable academic standards in higher education regionally and internationally, with emphasis on the promotion of quality assurance and maintenance of comparable international quality standards, for the past 7 years IUCEA has been developing a regional quality assurance system for universities in East Africa. The initiative is aimed at harmonizing the quality of higher education in the region. Among others, the need for a regional quality assurance system was prompted by the exponential expansion of higher education in East Africa that started in the early 1990s after the EAC Partner States had liberalized higher education. That policy change set in the establishment of private universities to complement the capacity that exists in public universities. In that regard, concern was raised over how to ensure the quality of higher education in the region and protecting the sector from falling prey to bogus providers. The general society in the region was concerned with the ever-mushrooming public and private higher education providers versus the need for maintenance of quality standards of the education provided, while financial, human and teaching resources remained scarce and therefore inadequate to meet the needs of the existing and emerging universities.

Initially, these concerns led to the creation of national statutory agencies in each of the EAC Partner States, with the main task of regulating the growth and development of higher

education in their respective countries. Once established, the agencies developed quality assurance systems that were applicable in regulating university education at national level. Despite these efforts, universities in East Africa continued to be faced with many challenges related to maintenance of quality, which were the result of, among others, lack of documented quality assurance systems/practices, limited awareness on the phenomenon of quality assurance, lack of comprehensive quality assurance guidelines and tools, existence of different perceptions of quality in higher education, and limited appreciation of value addition of quality assurance in university education and processes.

The Process to Establish the Regional System

In recognition of the situation indicated above, in a meeting in 2005 Vice Chancellors from some universities in East Africa and heads of the national commissions and councils for higher education in the EAC Partner States decided to develop a regional system of quality assurance that would also help in harmonization of the quality of higher education at the regional level, in order to promote student mobility, among others. Subsequently, in 2006 IUCEA in collaboration with the national commissions and council for higher education in Kenya (Commission for Higher Education, CHE), Tanzania (Tanzania Commission for Universities, TCU), and Uganda (National Council for Higher Education, NCHE), and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) forged a collaboration that was aimed at joint implementation of a process to develop a regional quality assurance system for higher education in East Africa, by drawing experiences from the Bologna Process in Europe and from the process to establish a regional quality assurance system in Central America.

Information Visit to Europe

The initial step in the process involved informal discussions between IUCEA and universities in the region, which were aimed at sensitizing the university leadership to buy-in the idea to establish a regional quality assurance system that would be based on harmonization of the existing national systems in each of the three countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), while bringing in international perspectives. This approach was also aimed at developing a system of quality assurance that would develop the region's international competitiveness in higher education. Subsequently, in 2006 IUCEA in collaboration with DAAD arranged an information visit to universities in Germany and the Netherlands for a group of vice chancellors from 24 universities in East Africa. Others who took part in the information visit were heads of the national commissions and councils for higher education from the three East African countries, some senior government officials, and some professors. The aim of the visit was to expose the participants to the quality assurance practices that existed at the German and Dutch universities visited, as part of a sensitization process to embrace the idea to establish a regional system of quality assurance for East Africa

akin to the model of the Bologna Process.

Steps of the Process

Upon return from the information visit the participants appreciated the need to establish a regional quality assurance system for universities in East Africa. In order to agree on the process to establish the system, IUCEA and the national commissions and councils for higher education organized a series of regional and national dialogue forums for the three countries. The dialogue forums made several resolutions on the process to establish a regional quality assurance system in East Africa, starting with the development of a quality assurance handbook, which was given the title “Roadmap to Quality”. Then IUCEA and the national commissions and councils for higher education in the EAC Partner States embarked of the development of the system through the following processes:

- (a) Developing a handbook containing quality assurance tools, guidelines, standards and procedures
- (b) Selecting cohorts of between 20 and 25 universities, starting with those which had some structured systems of quality assurance, to participate in the process
- (c) Undertaking capacity building in quality assurance at IUCEA, in university, and at the national commissions and councils for higher education in the Partner States, through training of quality assurance coordinators on how to use the regional quality assurance handbook and in conducting self and external evaluations at program level
- (d) Piloting the use of the quality assurance handbook by self- and external assessment
- (e) Continuing with dialogue events at regional and national levels in order to sensitize the different levels of university leadership on the regional quality assurance system and development of institutional quality assurance culture
- (f) Establishing a quality assurance coordinating office at IUCEA
- (g) IUCEA and the national commissions and councils for higher education helping universities to establish quality assurance units
- (h) Multiplying personnel capacity in quality assurance in universities

In 2008 the initiative was extended to institutions in Burundi and Rwanda, after the two countries had joined the East African Community in 2007.

Link of the System to the Goals of the East African Community

IUCEA became fully integrated into the East African Community framework after the enactment of the IUCEA Act in 2009. This entailed that the institution was now responsible for implementation of all decisions by the Community related to the development and promotion of higher education in the region, and to put up frameworks for harmonization of

higher education in East Africa as envisioned in the Protocol for the Establishment of an East African Common Market. Therefore, this development enhanced the need to establish a regional quality assurance system for higher education in the region. It also required IUCEA to develop a regional qualifications framework comprising of a credit system, categories, types and levels of qualifications, level descriptors, articulation, entry and exit modes, grading system, and recognition of prior learning. The qualifications framework was aimed at providing mechanisms for harmonization of education and training systems in East Africa, and to facilitate mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications as envisioned in the Protocol for the Establishment of the East African Common Market, and to promote regional integration. Furthermore, the system so developed would provide a generic framework onto which national qualifications frameworks in the Partner States would be anchored.

Accomplished Activities

Development of a Quality Assurance Handbook

In order to have a common understanding and to use common quality assurance approaches, it was deemed necessary to develop a handbook that would facilitate the region to talk the same language in quality assurance. The handbook would also contain common benchmarks, guidelines and procedures in quality assurance. Eventually, the handbook was prepared by an expert from the Netherlands working together with a team of regional quality assurance experts from Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. The preparation of the handbook took into consideration benchmarks, guidelines and procedures that were already in use by the national commissions and councils for higher education in the three countries.

During the development process of the handbook, various stakeholders, including staff from the national commissions and councils for higher education in the EAC Partner States, Vice Chancellors, as well as senior professors were engaged in a number of dialogue forums, aimed at validating the instruments in the handbook. The validation related to implementing good quality assurance practices, applying similar standards and criteria in universities in East Africa, developing institutional quality assurance systems fitting international developments in higher education, and making universities discover their own quality through the use of self-assessment instruments in internal quality assurance. Validation of the handbook also related to the teaching and learning processes, research, provision of outreach services, and for other institutional quality aspects. Eventually, the handbook was adapted to the national context of each country, and that of each university in the region. The handbook is now regarded as a guide for universities to achieve, improve, ensure and assure the quality of higher education.

The Handbook consists of 4 volumes. Volume 1 gives guidelines for self-assessment at the program level; Volume 2 covers guidelines for external evaluation; Volume 3 consists of

guidelines for self-assessment at institutional level; and Volume 4 provides guidelines for the implementation of a total quality assurance system. The handbook is now in use at IUCEA, the national commissions and councils for higher education, and in universities in all the EAC Partner States.

Capacity Building for Experts in Quality Assurance

In order to ensure that universities and the national commissions and councils for higher education have the capacity to undertake quality assurance functions in a sustainable manner based on the regional system, IUCEA in collaboration with DAAD and the German Rectors Conference (HRK) has been carrying out capacity building for quality assurance coordinators through training programs. The training programs aim at providing basic knowledge and hands-on skills to staff in universities and national commissions and councils for higher education in the EAC Partner States on the implementation of the regional quality assurance system. The expected learning outcomes of the training programs is to enable the participants to be able to use the quality assurance handbook in their respective universities, to be able to supervise the use of the handbook in their respective universities, to demonstrate skills of setting up quality assurance mechanisms in their universities, coordinating the evaluation of programs at their respective institutions, popularizing quality assurance values to the rest of the university by applying communication skills learnt during the course, demonstrating a clear vision for the role of a quality assurance unit in their universities, being able to develop quality assurance action plans during and after the training workshops, and working with top university management in their respective universities on quality assurance matters, including formulation of relevant quality assurance policies and conducting training of staff on the quality assurance aspects as enshrined in the Handbook.

Piloting the Handbook at Program Level

In order to ensure the eventual establishment and acceptability of the common quality assurance framework for higher education in universities in East Africa, Several universities were selected to participate in piloting the use of the quality assurance handbook. The piloting was conducted in cohorts of the universities. In the first cohort eight universities from Kenya and seven each from Tanzania and Uganda participated in the process in 2007/2008. In a second cohort, seven universities from Kenya, eight each from Tanzania and Uganda, and one each from Burundi and Rwanda participated in the training program that took place in 2008/2009. Therefore for the two cohorts a total of 47 universities participated in the pilot stage of the process to develop a regional quality assurance system. The programs that were used for the pilot process by cohorts 1 and 2 universities as stated above are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Programs Piloted in Self-Assessment and Peer Review

Program	First Cohort Universities (2008/2009)	Second Cohort Universities (2009/2010)	Total
Business Studies	14	8	22
Computer Science/Information Technology	5	9	14
BA in Education (Languages)	-	3	3
Agriculture	4	-	4
Medicine	-	4	4
Total	23	24	47

Currently, a capacity building process for a 3rd cohort of institutions is in progress, which involves training of 24 participants, 19 of whom are staff from universities and 6 from national commissions and councils for higher education in the Partner States. The training process commenced in June 2012 and will run up to June 2013.

The capacity building process also covered training of peers who would then conduct external program reviews. So far 52 peers have been trained and they participated in peer review exercises for universities in cohorts 1 and 2. The peer reviewers were arranged in groups of five consisting of a mix between those from a country where the respective university to be evaluated belongs, and those from other East African countries. The regional peers were joined with those appointed from Europe and other African countries. This was one of the main components of the process to establish the regional quality assurance system in East Africa. The experts were identified on the basis of having specific knowledge, professional expertise and experience in specific subjects they were called upon to evaluate. They were, therefore, persons of acceptable standing in their professions and academia. In carrying out peer reviews, the peers focused on developing quality improvement plans by the universities that had been reviewed. The review process was undertaken in an atmosphere of openness and mutual trust. The whole process contributed to enhanced transparency, and comparability of the quality standards of programs, courses and the quality of the institution's products.

External Evaluation of the Initiative

At the end of the pilot phase for universities in cohorts 1 and 2, the whole process to develop a regional quality assurance framework for universities in East Africa was subjected to evaluation by external experts against a framework modeled along the same lines as the IUCEA initiative. In that regard, a team of three international experts drawn from Africa, Europe and Latin America carried out a mid-term evaluation of the project. The evaluation process was carried out quite extensively. In the end a report was produced that had recommendations. The recommendations indicated that the process had been successful in many fronts but had also challenges and shortcoming in some areas. The external evaluators observed in the report that the initiative to establish a regional quality assurance system had been successful in making quality assurance mechanisms valued and accepted by the main stakeholders in the higher education systems in the region. It was also concluded that the process had enhanced the capacity of a core group of quality assurance experts in different areas, both within universities and the national commissions and councils for higher education; it increased awareness of the need to involve stakeholders in discussions about quality and relevance of higher education, and saw the need to regularly review the curriculum of study programs in universities.

The findings and recommendations by the external evaluators were considered seriously during the planning of the initiative for the period 2011-2015. Some of the recommendations that they made included the need for training of trainers so that capacity building in terms of quality assurance experts in the region could be expanded through the use of those already trained in the project, and developing training materials arising from identified deficiencies of the system, such as the paucity of evaluation or assessment tools or literature on such issues as tracer studies, identification of further training needs for the external evaluators quality assurance coordinators. The evaluators specifically gave the examples of quality management, curriculum development, modes of teaching and learning, and issues to be considered in the training. They also recommended the need for improved training of external reviewers, including giving them opportunities to be observers in peer review visits conducted by experienced peers so that they could learnt both hard and soft skills.

Lessons Learnt

There are many lessons that have been learnt from what has been done so far in the process to introduce a regional quality assurance system in higher education in East Africa. These include the importance of creating an interface of politicians and university management in developing a quality assurance strategic plan. It is also important to bring in top university managers and the middle level leadership in universities by continuously keeping them informed on the process. There is also need for jointly lobbying for funds to ensure that the necessary funding and staffing is provided in time. It is also very important

to integrate international experts, practitioners and change agents from both the regions and beyond, into an international training and consultancy team and work with the same people throughout the process. There is anecdotal evidence from a number of universities that key recommendations of the external assessments carried out by peer reviewers to have been put into practice, and that curriculum revision is under way in a number of universities. Self-assessment at program level has been multiplied in a number of universities based on experiences from the pilot phase. IUCEA and the national commissions and councils for higher education in the Partner States have been able to create a pool of experts on quality assurance who are now providing services as resource persons in various national and regional initiatives, including participating in the on-going training of the 3rd cohort of quality assurance coordinators. Some of the quality assurance experts are now being used in the region as peers in institutional evaluation processes for purposes such as accreditation and chartering of universities.

Challenges

Challenges encountered during implementation of the initiative to introduce a regional quality assurance system for universities in East Africa include resistance among some staff, students and management, quality assurance personnel being 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 policies and units in universities.

Conclusions

In summary, the initiative to introduce a regional quality assurance system for universities in East Africa focused on the establishment of appropriate quality assurance guidelines, procedures and standards, including benchmarks for academic programs. 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 therefrom, by clearly articulating the program learning outcomes, the different qualification levels, credit system and recognition of prior learning, among others. Hence, the qualifications framework will facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications across the region as envisioned in the Treaty for the Establishment of an East African Common Market. All these interventions are aimed at transforming East Africa into a common higher education area as the ultimate goal of the East African Community.