

Beyond Compliance and Certification to Acculturation of Quality in Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract:

While quality assurance (QA) is evidently present in higher educational institutions in Kenya, this paper observes that existence of QA mechanisms, though necessary, is inadequate to guarantee delivery of quality services and products. The author argues that HEIs need to acculturate quality assurance which requires going beyond mere compliance and certification to entrenching in the organisational culture the standards, values, attitudes and practices related to quality. The method used is Philosophical reflection and argumentation grounded on factual and documented evidence related to quality assurance. The paper concludes that for quality assurance to be acculturated, the quest for quality must be demonstrated in the organisations' resource acquisition and allocation priorities; performance management; strategic planning and implementation; succession planning; reward management; staff recruitment, training and development among other processes.

Key Words:

Quality, Quality assurance, compliance, certification, acculturation

1.1.0 Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) in terms of institutional structures and processes is evidently present in higher educational institutions (HEIs) in East African countries. In Kenya, public and private universities, for instance, have internal quality assurance departments, policies and procedures that assist the institutions to ensure that quality standards are adhered to. The Commission for University Education (CUE) is an institution that approves establishment of universities in Kenya. It oversees standardization, accreditation, governance and supervision of university education. The commission has developed elaborate standards that guide Kenyan universities in executing their teaching, research and community service mandates. In addition, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology has established performance management that commits public universities to mutually agreed performance targets. The East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN) brings together quality assurance practitioners from higher educational institutions across Eastern Africa. The network enjoys support from individual universities, national institutions overseeing higher education in East Africa, Inter University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) and international institutions interested in promoting quality assurance such as the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). EAQAN has an elaborate strategic plan 2016-2020 through which it seeks to enhance capacity building in quality assurance, develop a critical mass of quality assurance experts, promote networking and collaboration in quality assurance matters, support research and publication in quality assurance and improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in HEIs (Khamis, 2016).

The existence of QA mechanisms and initiatives is commendable and should be appreciated and encouraged. However, it is inadequate to guarantee delivery of quality services and products consistently and sustainably unless pursuit of quality becomes entrenched in the accepted and operational culture of higher education institutions. Without acculturation of quality, quality assurance mechanisms and processes lose their vitality, relevance and synergy that make them transformative and meaningful. They are reduced to mechanical formalities that are regarded as burdensome and unhelpful. Rather than being ongoing processes, they are reduced to events. Instead of being self-prescribed and internally owned and driven, they become impositions by outside authorities that are grudgingly received. Consequently, wherever commitment to and pursuit of quality is not acculturated in an organization, quality assurance activities are received with fear and suspicion as attempts to find fault and apportion blame. The opinion of the present author is that while quality assurance mechanisms exist, acculturation of quality has not yet been achieved in higher educational institutions in Kenya. This paper addresses this problem. It identifies challenges and prospects that need to be considered in the effort to acculturate quality assurance in HEIs.

1.1.1 Clarification of Key Concepts

Before going further, it is important to clarify how key concepts are used in the context of this paper. Quality is understood as the capacity of a process, service or product to suit a given purpose due to its capacity to satisfy implicit or explicit requirements. Human life and pursuits are purpose driven and thus quality an integral aspect of purposeful human action. Quality assurance refers to a

planned and deliberate process of determining the extent, to which specified requirements are being met, maintained and enhanced (Hayward, 2006). Compliance refers to abiding by the standards and rules established by external authorities without necessarily making sense of the rules, owning them and taking full responsibility for their implementation. Certification refers to being formally and legally allowed to assume a specified status as a result of satisfying specified requirements. A formal document is usually given attesting to the fact that specified requirements were met and the status assigned is deserved. Acculturation refers to the process of learning new ways of living, working, and relating with others. In the context of quality assurance in an organisation, it involves developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and habits that enable persons to consistently strive to meet specified requirements and encourage others to do the same. Some of the elements that demonstrate acculturation of quality include the habit of self-reflection and improvement, clarity of and harmony between individual as well as institutional purposes, appreciation of the place of processes and systems, willingness to take responsibility, willingness to collaborate and accommodate diverse perspectives and readiness to adapt imaginatively to new situations (Blackstock et al., 2010)

1.2 Issues in HEIs in Kenya Indicative of Lack of Acculturation of Quality : Some Documented Findings

A review of IPAR (2008), Gudo et al. (2011), Kaburu and Embeywa (2014), Ojiambo (2009), Republic of Kenya (2012), Wamahiu (2015) and Wanzala (2013) demonstrates that though higher education in Kenya has been made more accessible and attempts have been and continue to be made to enhance its quality and relevance, many challenges persist that are detrimental to quality.

To begin with, education in Kenya at all levels has tended to be examination oriented thus shifting focus from effective development of desired competencies to competition for further educational and or job opportunities. Learning is reduced to drilling and rote memorization at the expense of development of intellectual, practical, social and existential competencies. Such learning disables instead of empowering learners. It stifles their curiosity and creativity, undermines their ability to develop their personhood and relate with others and diminishes their entrepreneurial capabilities and interests. The competitiveness generated by the examination orientation tempts learners, teachers, parents and educational institutions alike to seek shortcuts leading to leakages of examinations and increasing cases of cheating in examinations. This breeds a culture that is averse to integrity, accountability, merit and transparency. Such a culture is inconsistent with commitment to quality.

Increasing demand for higher education in Kenya has led to rapid expansion of public and private universities. This expansion has not always been matched with expansion in infrastructure and equipment as well as increase in fulltime qualified staff in HEIs. The situation is made worse, especially in public institutions, by low funding by government. Consequently, the capability of the available teaching is overstretched and part-time lecturing is becomes a dominant way of teaching. Consultation and mentoring opportunities are diminished as the student –lecturer ratio deteriorates. This undermines quality and creates conditions that discourage acculturation of quality.

The increasing demand for education has also been blamed for encouraging commercialisation of higher education. Rather than regarding higher education as a quality service to society that needs to be provided professionally, it is regarded as an income generating activity that supplements the low funding by government. Programs are launched not so much because institutions are well equipped and placed to run them but because the programs are in demand and as such have greater returns commercially. In Kenya, some two public universities have had some of their campuses closed in 2016 because they had not met minimum quality requirements. Had such universities acculturated quality rather than regarding it as an external requirement, they would not have opened the campuses in the first place. Instead, they would have diligently prepared until they were well placed to deliver quality services and products in the new campuses.

Higher education in Kenya has also been found to lack responsiveness to emerging needs and issues. For instance, Kenyans acquired a new constitution in 2010 which is reputed as one of the most progressive and people centred. The constitution among other issues emphasises national values such as integrity, accountability, equity and justice. It also seeks to protect human rights and promote just and democratic governance. However, the education system in Kenya is yet to be aligned to these provisions of the constitution. Responsiveness to emerging needs is one element of a culture of quality. Its absence therefore indicates the need to acculturate quality.

The reviewed documents also concur that there is a mismatch between what is taught in higher education in Kenya and the demands in the labour market in terms of both standards and skills. This indicates a gap in the relevance of higher education. When education becomes irrelevant, it loses its potency to address developmental needs of the nation. Consequently, social ills like poverty, unemployment, corruption and violence continue to pose a challenge to the peace and well being of Kenya and Kenyans. No responsive educational policies have been developed to effectively address these social problems. This is indicative of an education system that has not acculturated quality.

1.3 Issues in HEIs in Kenya Indicative of Lack of Acculturation of Quality: Some Lessons Learnt from ISO 9001 Quality Audits

Quality audits are confidential. Consequently specific names and details of non-conformities raised in the audits are withheld deliberately. What is shared in this paper are the lessons discerned from the audits which are relevant for this discussion. ISO standards are a globally recognized series of quality standards covering diverse sectors such as Management, environment and Health and Safety. ISO 9001 standard provides guidelines for assuring quality in management systems. It is one of the most popular sets of standards. It is reputed for providing guidance in enhancing quality in documentation; communication; customer focus; efficient use of material and human resources; design, development, validation and delivery of products and services; monitoring, evaluation; prevention, detection and correction of non-conformities; self-appraisal through internal audits and commitment to continual improvement. ISO 9001: 2015 is the latest version of ISO 9001 standard. It emphasises evaluation of and responsiveness to internal and external environments, assessment of risks and opportunities and performance evaluation. Public Universities in Kenya are encouraged by the government, through performance contracting, to be ISO certified as one way of enhancing good governance as well as delivery of quality goods and services. The author uses his own quality

auditing experience since 2007 in two public universities in Kenya to provide insights on the prospects and challenges related to the task of acculturating quality assurance in HEIs.

Some of the positive lessons the author has learnt from quality auditing in public universities in Kenya is that the process is often well supported by top management. One reason could be that ISO certification is a requirement in the performance contract with government. Auditing top managers in the universities is easier than auditing lower cadre staff. The lower cadre staff are more resistant to quality audits. They mainly regard the audits as a waste of time that hardly yields tangible results. Others regard it as management's way of snooping on subordinates and documenting incriminating evidence for future use against deviant employees. Auditors are therefore regarded with suspicion, fear and indifference. Acculturation of quality requires that all members of an organisation understand, accept, support and implement quality standards.

Implementation of ISO standards is expensive and public universities seeking and maintaining certification have to allocate financial resources towards these ends. This means that quality assurance is regularly discussed in management meetings on resource allocation. However, more funding is needed for quality assurance once acculturation of quality is pursued since quality is an integral part of every undertaking in HEIs. Rather than being regarded as an inspection- which is an event, it is to be regarded as an ongoing and integrated process permeating everything that is done in an institution. Acculturation of quality relates in a reasoned and balanced way the benefits and corresponding costs of quality assurance.

Some challenges that have been observed include considering monitoring and evaluation of quality as an event rather than a process. Quality audits are considered as events that come and go rather than ongoing processes that all stakeholders participate in. Acculturation of quality involves encouraging stakeholders to express their requirements and needs that institutions take into consideration and address. Employees, for instance learn the habit of being responsive to the needs and requirements of their clients. Clients as well are encouraged to understand the needs and requirements of their service providers. This mutual interest stimulates an interactive and insightful negotiation of standards and values that govern service delivery.

During the quality audits, employees who are defensive when non-conformities are raised demonstrate an inner attitude of aversion to evaluation and correction. Quality audits target processes and systems as opposed to persons. Acculturation of quality involves encouraging and supporting members of an organisation to learn from mistakes and non-conformities and using such instances as opportunities for improvement. Fear of failure and the tendency to blame people rather than address issues is a hindrance to acculturation of quality.

When non-conformities are identified, auditees are expected to analyse the root cause of the non-conformities and find an appropriate corrective action that will prevent the non-conformity from occurring in future. Some challenges observed include ineffective analysis of root causes of non-conformities thus exposing the system to future recurrence of non-compliance. In other instances, inadequate resources are allocated to effectively closing the non-conformities. This indicates that acculturation of quality involves developing the habit of and commitment to addressing non-conformities promptly and effectively. Resolution of non-conformities needs to be adequately prioritised and resourced.

Resistance to change is another hindrance to acculturation of quality. Quality assurance involves openness to new requirements. Reality is dynamic and new and better ways of doing things generate new expectations and standards. Acculturation of quality involves developing the ability to anticipate and manage change effectively. This calls for readiness and willingness to learn and adapt to new contexts and standards. In the universities, there is a tendency for lecturers to glorify the good old ways of doing things- the 'what we used to do' mentality. The assumption underlying this mentality is that reality is static and the old tested ways are absolutely better than any new alternatives. Such an attitude resists innovation, constructive criticism and transformation of processes and institutions. It also fosters prejudices based on age, gender, ethnicity, professional and educational. Such prejudices work against teamwork and the synergy that is available when diverse people share a common purpose.

The author has also observed that the tendency to 'talk about issues' rather than document them leads to waste of innovative ideas. Complaints and compliments are often given as people talk and there ends up being no record of what transpires in conversations. In some cases, registers provided for documenting customer feedback are not used because service providers are unwilling to have complaints written down. They regard it as self-incrimination. They are happier when complaints end up being mere talk. As discussed earlier, there is need to detach persons from issues. Some complaints may be about persons and in such cases, solutions will be achieved if the persons are willing to listen and reflect on the complaints against them and find effective ways of addressing them. In other instances, complaints indicate gaps in policies, processes, procedures and systems that need to be addressed. Documenting complaints, suggestions and compliments provide a factual basis for decision making and improvements. Acculturation of quality therefore requires developing the habit of documenting issues and addressing the same in an objective way.

Where documentation is done, often the data is not used to drive future decisions and planning. An institution ends up generating data it does not analyse, interpret and use. For instance, research done in universities hardly informs university community outreach activities or even government policy. Rarely do universities commission research on their own processes and systems. Quality audits demonstrate that departments and sections rarely reflect on data generated in the course of service delivery to inform future operations. This indicates unwillingness to learn from data or the assumption that there is nothing new to learn. This complacent attitude is inconsistent with quality assurance. Data is helpful in monitoring and evaluating the extent to which standards are implemented and objectives are achieved. Acculturation of quality therefore involves attentiveness and responsiveness to data.

1.4 Towards Acculturation of Quality in HEIs: Going Beyond Mere Compliance and Certification

Acculturation of quality involves learning to live, work and relate with people in a way that is consistent with stated and implied requirements and encouraging as well as supporting others to do the same. A culture is the total way of life of a people that embraces both material (such as dress and equipment) and non-material aspects (such as language and values). Enculturation of quality, therefore embracing integrated material and non-material elements that promote fulfillment of stated and implied requirements.

An organisation that promotes acculturation of quality goes beyond mere compliance and certification. Ordinarily, compliance refers to the practice of obeying rules made by persons in positions of authority. Such compliance is outer directed and quality requirements are likely to be regarded as 'impositions from above'. Such requirements are therefore rarely owned and cherished. Their implementation is likely to be done mechanically, grudgingly and half-heartedly. Certification is regarded as an end rather than a means as well as a beginning of a never ending quest for delivery of quality services and products.

Acculturation of quality requires institutions to consider externally imposed requirements as minimum standards that can and should be transcended. Once commitment to quality is self-imposed, the institution develops, implements, reviews and improves her own quality assurance mechanisms and standards which are understood, accepted and used by her members.

In order to acculturate quality, an institution needs to deliberately and strategically align its structures and operations to the approximation of the ideal of quality. Such approximation of quality will be demonstrated in the organizations' resource acquisition and allocation priorities; performance management; strategic planning and implementation; succession planning; reward management; staff recruitment, training and development among other processes. Pursuit of quality needs to be prioritised, recognised, supported and rewarded. This requires going beyond mere compliance and certification (which often requires satisfying minimum requirements) to entrenching in the organisational culture the standards, values, attitudes and practices related to quality (and inspiring people to supersede minimum requirements) thus making quality assurance the accepted way of life (and doing business) in the organization.

1.5 Conclusion

This paper has observed that quality assurance mechanisms exist in HEIs in Kenya and this is commendable. Opportunities exist for acculturation since quality assurance mechanisms are in place and increasingly resources are being channeled towards quality assurance. In addition, a legal framework supportive of pursuit of quality exists and increasingly demand for quality services by assertive customers is evident.

However, acculturation of quality is yet to be achieved since pursuit of quality is not yet demonstrable as the consistent and accepted way of life and doing business in HEIs. Challenges such as inadequate resourcing of quality assurance activities, resistance to change, indifference to monitoring and evaluation, inattention to data and poor documentation have been discussed as indicators of the need to acculturate quality. For this to be achieved, institutional structures and operations need to align strategically to pursuit of quality as an integral organisational priority.

1.6 Recommendations

The paper recommends:

1. Studies on organisational cultures of HEIs to ascertain the levels of acculturation of quality assurance in individual institutions.
2. More research to be done on quality assurance within and across HEIs.

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