



Editorial

Building the Vision: Higher Education and Quality Assurance in East Africa

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The East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Forum

The East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN) is a network of quality assurance practitioners in the East African region. The Network was formally established in 2012 in Entebbe following the DIES (Dialogue on Innovative Education Strategies) initiative, a partnership between the IUCEA (Inter-University for East Africa), DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and higher education commissions in the region, to enhance quality of higher education in the East African region. The EAQAN was established primarily to provide a platform for discussion and exchange of experiences among quality assurance (QA) coordinators and other stakeholders in quality assurance, teaching and learning as well as related issues in the management of higher education.

Following agreement during the EAQAN General Assemblies the major activity of the EAQAN has been to host capacity building and knowledge sharing QA forums in May every year since 2012. The forums have been funded by the IUCEA and DAAD with expertise provided by the HRK (The German Rectors' Conference) and other higher education institutions in the region. What follows in this edition is a compilation of a selection of key papers from the 2015 forum, held in Nairobi, Kenya, where over eighty universities from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda participated, including the regulatory Higher Education Commissions of these countries.

However, bringing together some of the most progressive thinkers in a single edition is both a challenge and an opportunity when one is addressing two areas of significance. Both 'higher education' and 'quality assurance' are

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socially, politically, and morally charged. This brings forward the imperative to make the implicit explicit as we examine the complex effort to balance accessible higher education with aspirations of educational excellence. To relay the dialogue and build the vision, academic leaders in East Africa have contributed by reflecting on the status quo, articulating QA trends and outcomes, and sharing promising practices.

Reflecting the Status Quo

Throughout the contributions, quality assurance was often described as off the radar in lieu of operational, financial, and structural emphasis. Most authors mention or themselves were situated within quality assurance (audit) offices or directorates, but descriptions of these QA focal points were highly variable and roles/functions were equally disparate. Equally as oblique in form and function was the element of measurement, which many contributors intimately aligned with QA but found lacking in rigour and evidentiary base to be consistently applied.

Kakembo and Makumbi found QA programmes to be routinised and minimised to ‘effectiveness and regularity of teaching and research’ or products reflecting these (e.g. publication in international journals; faculty promotion; student success; university reputation) and monitoring of student welfare. They remind us that, not only do universities have the triadic mandate to teach, research/innovate, and engage, but must contribute to each core function in pursuit of pre-eminence. The article sets the stage for the reader to consider competing aspects of immersion and isolation within the university which is variably seen as a social asset and a haven for individuality. Their premise is that universities often excel at the first two vertices, but the community engagement vertex remains un/under-addressed, thereby becoming the weak link in assessing and achieving quality assurance. Their work revisits the quandary of how (or perhaps how well) does this academic milieu mesh grassroots interests with classical elitist abstractions. These authors posited that full assessment of operational and resource efficiencies, as well as quality assurance, are more likely to be achieved when legitimising and integrating all three aspects of the triad.

Mgaiwa and Ishengoma’s exploration quickly draws our attention to the ‘push and pull’ of quality assurance and control processes within private universities in Tanzania. Government oversight (PULL) to assuring quality in higher education is met with weak institutional structures and capacities. Their insights into constraints ranging from inadequate resources (fiscal, human) to core leadership skills and commitment quickly shift (PUSH) quality assurance to the periphery. Rather than a reactive reliance on guidelines, Mgaiwa and

Ishengoma suggest a proactive embedding of a culture of quality assurance across students, staff, and faculty in the emerging context of private universities in developing contexts.

Kagundu and Marwa's consideration of quality assurance in Kenya's higher education institutions reconceptualises future efforts as collaborative and inter-sectoral rather than an internally driven process with external monitoring. This approach mirrors Karemba and Makumbi's perspective on engagement as an area of opportunity for quality assurance. The authors suggest that institutional benchmarking will not only embed the culture of quality improvement (also reflected on by Mgaiwan and Ishengoma) but take the entire process to a level of continuous improvement involving all institutional stakeholders. Such benchmarking will not only move individual institutions along the quality assurance continuum, but will potentiate diffusion to all higher education institutions.

Articulating QA Trends and Outcomes

Select contributions took us beyond the descriptive level, laying out the gauntlet on 'how to' and 'what to' assess. Within this we are taken through the maze of terminologies, taxonomies, targets, and tracers, only to come to understand that quality assurance measurement is in its infancy.

Brumwell, Deller and MacFarlane's provocative critical piece highlights relevance and risks of linking quality assurance with learning outcomes, assessment tools, and credentialling, reminding us that the global uptake of learning outcomes as indicators of student success and to inform policy must be accompanied by quantification and validation of such indices. It is clear from their global work that a shared lexicon and a classification (typology) of higher education learning outcomes are rudimentary at best and absent at worst. Their insights into the 'ripple effects' of learning outcomes for quality assurance in operations, engagement, accountabilities, institutional relevance and beyond buoy us as academics, practitioners and mentors to the potential 'tidal wave' made possible through engaging with *organizations such as Tuning *Program, EAQUAN ... to define, refine and align with government, institution and employer expectations.

Tennant and Khamis broach the elephant in the room with their consideration of student evaluation of teaching, looking at this type of input as both high stakes and high potential in the quality assurance rubric. Reaching beyond the obvious assessment of the quality of the student–teacher dyad, the authors delineate student evaluations as formative rather than performance assessment tools. Of interest is their consideration of coercion free methods to gain student input linked to the intentionality to act on their findings.

Egesah and Wahome bring attention to the imperative of tracer studies which take higher education institutions, in the persona of our graduates, to the precipice of labour market expectations and futures, and quickly returns us to the reality of our need to be/become relevant and reorient to current societal demands. Within this 'near real time' exploration of Moi University (Kenya) graduate effectiveness, the author suggests the potential to adapt, adopt or abandon curriculum and/or programmes is maximised if these studies precede curriculum reviews. In reflecting on the step by step process and insights on managing challenges through strategic targeting, Egesah and Wahome reframe tracer studies as necessary for credibility and accountability to a range of stakeholders and society.

Sharing Promising Practices

Khamis and Chapman reflect on the barriers and facilitators to an innovative faculty mentoring initiative across sites and borders. The effort clearly templated the pathway to transformational relationships and learning that are achievable through quality partnerships and shared agendas.

Khamis, Dhamani and Petrucka present the genesis of the Aga Khan University's Network of Quality Assurance and Improvement with a focus on self-assessment informed by the Inter-University Council for East Africa's process harmonisation. Allocation of resources (time, human) and a vision for quality leaders and learners as well as professional and market relevance were seen as foundational and ensured ownership in the efforts. The co-incidence of this process with the creation of a Quality Assurance Directorate messaged a leadership and institutional commitment to a quality framework.

Finally, Dhamani, Kanji, and Petrucka reflect on the often embattled evaluation approach of Multiple Choice Questions and align these with cognitive domain assessment. Not only do they reinvigorate and give credibility to the often maligned MCQ approach, they provide an exemplar of how to move forward on a continuing professional development approach to ensure capacities and quality assurance in the creation and utilization of MCQs in assessing learning outcomes.

Launching the Dialogue

With this background and mindset, your reading journey into the complex navigation of quality assurance in East Africa is launched. The contributions are representative of a range of changes taken in the voyage: storms and norms encountered; and, most importantly, successful maiden voyages.