COLLABORATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RWANDAN HIGHER EDUCATION: REALITIES, ISSUES, APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the East African countries have embarked on a process of implementing quality assurance initiatives in higher education. As a result, quality assurance mechanisms are gradually emerging at continental, regional, national and institutional levels. Regulatory, administrative and pedagogical measures are developed and applied in order to harmonize, coordinate and evaluate the actions of higher education institutions. This paper takes a critical look at fundamental choices related to this commitment. It attempts to highlight the main features of the quality assurance process in Rwanda. The paper attempts to understand how national quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions adapt to their structure and use the instruments that support the quality standards. It aims to study precisely the concrete field practices associated with quality policies. The intention is to identify the explicit objectives of quality policies and to question beyond these good intentions, as well as analyse a number of processes, mechanisms and tendencies which give field actions a meaning different from that given to them by the actors. The objective is to highlight the pedagogical concerns of the field actors of quality assurance and at the same time, question a certain number of logics and arrangements in which these preoccupations are today invited to be interpreted and applied.

Keywords: *Academic quality approach, collaboration, higher learning education, quality assurance.*

Introduction

Transformations in the economic foundations of contemporary society and the process of regional integration have led to the explosion of initiatives in higher education institutions of countries located in the East African region. Thus, the meaning, the cognitive and normative framework, and the direction of regulation of actions undertaken within higher education have undergone a spectacular transformation. To meet the requirements related to the new management system and to address underlying challenges, the Rwandan government has defined rules and mechanisms to monitor the functioning of higher education institutions (MINECOFIN, 2004). These rules and mechanisms, while promoting control and autonomy at the same time, are implemented at national and institutional levels of Rwandan higher education system. They include measures that ensure the evaluation of teaching and managerial activities undertaken in higher learning institutions. The scope of those measures encompasses the institutional audit and ranking, institutional accreditation and programs accreditation.

This paper attempts to understand this new phenomenon by reflecting on the challenges, practices, and approaches of improving quality assurance systems in higher education institutions in Rwanda. It identifies the societal factors that contributed to its emergence and the logic in which it fits. The argument of the paper is that the quality approaches implemented in Rwanda are aligned with a public management system developed and activated at the international level. This system provides the process to follow and the tools for performance evaluation. It then guides the discourse and interpretation that local actors focus on while implementing the quality assurance processes.

This paper is based on a critical study of official texts on the organization of higher education in Rwanda from the 2000s to the present day. It also relies on the analysis of interviews conducted with different educational actors, mainly those charged with academic quality in higher education institutions in Rwanda. Texts and interviews were subsequently analysed in an attempt to identify the academic dynamics in action and their impact on the interpretation and application of quality assurance mechanisms in Rwanda.

The paper contributes to the development of quality assurance in East Africa and in Rwanda, in particular, by establishing a baseline on the status of quality assurance in Rwandan higher education. Thus, it provides information to education policymakers, stakeholders and development partners involved in higher education

learning in Rwanda and East Africa. It assists them by providing information that is necessary in the process of identifying and prioritizing the capacity enhancement needs for quality improvement.

Macro-economic Changes and Evolution of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Systems

At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the higher education system in Africa underwent a major transformation. This transformation is largely the result of economic changes at the international level; the decline of Keynesian perspective followed by the introduction of market logic, globalization and economic liberalism. From the 1940s, the Keynesian perception which advocates a welfare state that assumes all the responsibilities of the regime, dominated the system of governance. It was weakened by the episode of stagflation and the economic crisis of the 1970s. Then, the neoliberal vision acquired a dominant position. It is built around themes such as economic liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and the like. It was reinforced in the early 1990s when the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dislocation of the Soviet bloc redesigned the geopolitical map of the world. As a result, different economic foundations aligned with neoliberal ideas and market logic were reinforced. Consequently, globalization, which implies transnational competition, became stronger. Accordingly, internationalization, which emphasizes cooperation among nations, was developed in parallel (Imaniriho, 2015).

These changes have accentuated the impact of the global economy on the functioning of higher education systems. Higher education institutions now operate within a broader and more global framework. The dynamics created by these changes have produced positive results, such as increasing access to the education system, diversifying curricula, as well as strengthening the private sector amongst others. It has also given rise to multidimensional challenges facing contemporary higher education systems: a rapid increase in enrolment which is not proportional to the increase in infrastructure, materials and qualified teachers; a proliferation of private institutions, which creates problems of supervision and regulation; a decrease in public funding in higher education, the emergence of cross-border academic programs, and strong interest in international collaborative research activities; and an emphasis on developing a strong process that ensures the international mobility of students.

In this international dynamic, higher education plays a decisive role in the configuration which combines globalization, internationalization and neoliberalism. Imaniriho (2017) highlights the elements that justify the interest accorded to higher learning institutions: the rapid evolution of technological and scientific advances; a population that aspires for more education; and the labour market requiring higher and higher qualification levels. The combination of these three elements creates an operating framework based on knowledge, trade and competition. These recent and rapid developments as well as the underlying challenges have led to the end of the existing education system, which had become inadequate and obsolete. The higher education system was then placed at the centre of the debates that took place in the 1990s and 2000s in order to respond to the new and pressing demands of society that require a higher education system capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century (UNESCO, 1998; UNESCO, 2009). The findings of these debates have uncovered an impasse in the higher education system. At the same time, the findings have proposed new models and new academic architectures to be put in place to meet the demands of modern society. They raised new issues that had previously been given little consideration. This is the case for quality assurance, which has been given a prominent place in the teaching-learning process at the higher education level.

After the strengthening of the mode of operation advocated by the market economy, neoliberal ideas, globalization and internationalization, the higher education system has become complex, diversified and interdependent. This reality raised new questions about quality standards. The process of organizing, coordinating and evaluating the higher education system has become complicated for educational authorities. Using diversified methods and procedures, the comparability of degrees awarded by institutions operating in different environmental contexts, the legitimacy of institutions operating in different environmental and legal frameworks' difficulties were particularly evident in the harmonization of activities of institutions. Quality assurance has now become a priority for many countries. International or regional organizations, states and higher education institutions have responded by putting in place external and internal quality assurance systems characterized by the establishment of quality assurance units, the development of policies and quality assurance frameworks; conducting internal and external institutional assessments; and benchmarking the quality assurance process amongst other processes.

Quality Approaches in Higher Education

Questions about the quality of education are not recent. However, they have grown unprecedented over the last three decades. Since the strengthening of neoliberal ideas, quality approaches have adapted to the specificities of the market logic. Different authors show that this recent and rapid fascination with quality assurance in higher education is the result of the primordial role attributed to both efficiency and competition. The first has created an increasing demand for results and accountability based on predefined indicators and benchmarks. The second is related to the fact that the higher education system has become competitive and the beneficiaries of education have turned into customers. This has increased the desire to be comparable with the best higher learning institutions in the country or outside the country in order to attract clients. This reality raises essential conceptual questions that directly involve the contexts of implementation and management of quality approaches in higher education. However, there are two main types of approaches to quality management in higher education; the approach that associates quality with efficiency and effectiveness, and the approach that assimilates quality to the process.

The approach that associates quality with efficiency and effectiveness considers quality as achieving the best with the means at hand and is able to be held accountable at all times in the way in which these means have been used. They consider that production of higher education institutions is of high quality if the predefined technical standards are continuously respected. They give more importance to effectiveness (achieving the objective with the means envisaged for this purpose) and efficiency (achieving this objective with the least possible means) (Charlier, Croché & Leclercq, 2012). This approach is often based on one or more existing benchmarks presenting the main lines of quality models adapted to the reality of higher education (Sylin & Delausnay, 2006). These benchmarks show different elements that would be useful to take into account in any implementation of a quality assessment process within a higher education institution: the governance, operations, resources development and management, teaching process, external relations, and results of the institution.

The approach that assimilates quality to the process involves the voluntary involvement of individuals who pay close attention to all the elements likely to impair quality and propose solutions to reduce their influence (Charlier, Croché & Leclercq, 2012). The actors create within their institution the necessary tools of questioning the quality process. They choose the level of entry (program, faculty, institution); theme of work (teaching process learning, reception of students, tracer study, involvement of partners, system of assessment of the final work, evaluation of infrastructures, etc.). They determine the methodology (the tools or grid of reading predefined from the outside or constructed on the spot). This process consists of giving meaning to the institutional realities and thus allows local actors involved to give meaning to their professional practices and to standardize the internal management methods of the concerned institution (Sylin & Delausnay, 2006).

The relevance of each of these two approaches requires key elements such as the involvement, support, ownership and collaboration of actors on the ground. Proposed indicators need to be revised and reinterpreted internally. The approach adopted cannot succeed unless it is envisaged as a process involving the negotiation of the chosen indicators rather than a blind compliance with the rules imposed by a group inside or outside the institution, without negotiation on indicators and evaluation criteria. The quality approach should then attribute much importance to the internal validation of indicators and evaluation criteria before any action of quality assessment is undertaken. It should be the consequence of the moral quality of the local actors, and this is the fruit of a long socialization process (Charlier, Croché & Leclercq, 2012).

Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Rwanda

The educational system in Rwanda has its roots in the colonial heritage. Rwanda was first colonized by Germany and then by Belgium. The school system was set up by missionaries, mainly Catholic, during German colonization. After the First World War, the country came under Belgian control. Teaching was at this stage in the embryonic stage. The Belgian colonial administration and the European missionaries had particularly been interested in the development of primary and secondary education, and higher education was the result of the efforts made by the government of Rwanda after independence.

During the colonial period, few higher learning institutions were created in Africa. From the beginning, the pioneers of higher education in Africa have raised the question of the quality of higher education on the African continent. They then found an answer in the system of affiliations. Each higher education institution established in Africa was affiliated with a higher education institution located in the colonizing country. The authority on the quality of university education in the affiliated institute was based on the evaluation criteria applied within the

institution of affiliation. The winners of the affiliated institutions received diplomas awarded by the institutions of affiliation. Thus, through this system, the affiliated institution became an integral part of the higher education system of the colonizing country. During this period, the nationals of Rwanda and Burundi, colonized by Belgium and considered at that time as part of Central Africa, joined the University of Louvanium (Democratic Republic of the Congo). They were then subject to the quality control process applied in Belgium.

The situation changed after independence in 1962. The first national higher education institution was established in 1963. From the beginning, ambiguity arose on the definition of the quality required for this institution. First, the new ruling class wanted institutions that provided high-quality education and were designed to train a highly skilled workforce. However, the state did not provide all the financial means necessary to achieve this ambition. The faculties and programs were funded by different external donors, each with their own particular aspirations and requirements. To ensure that academic programmes and assessment procedures follow academic rigor and standards, Rwandan higher learning institutions have established the external evaluation system. The evaluators were mandated by the government of Rwanda, international organizations such as UNESCO, and institutions operating in foreign countries according to the faculties they financed (Imaniriho, 2017).

During the 1990s and 2000s, pressure from macroeconomic changes (implementation of market economy and neoliberal ideas) has had an impact on the quality assurance process in higher education in Rwanda. The country has experienced a number of changes in its higher education system. Spectacular changes can be observed at several levels thus increasing access to the education system, easing the regulatory framework, and diversifying educational programs. These factors have increased the pressure on higher education. Thus, changes that would improve quality were implemented.

Quality Assurance at Rwandan National and Institutional Level: Realities and Issues

The changes adopted to improve academic quality in higher education institutions in Rwanda are part of a broad quality assurance framework adopted by East African countries. At the end of the 1990s, East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) ratified a treaty on the creation of an East African community. They were joined later by Rwanda, Burundi and Southern Sudan. In order to ensure the mutual recognition of qualifications and harmonization of academic programmes within the countries of the East African Community, an Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) was established. The process of developing a regional harmonization mechanism began in 2010. It involved the establishment of a regional qualifications framework and a credit transfer and accumulation system (IUCEA, 2013). As a result of the changes at international and regional level, the East African countries changed their regulatory framework in order to better integrate into the new institutional configuration. The need for an effective and harmonized quality assurance process has become a priority in national strategies of higher education. Thus, national quality assurance agencies have been set up to better supervise the functioning of higher education systems.

In this context, Rwanda has created the higher education council (HEC). This council assumes the following functions: Develop performance assessment criteria that include quantifiable, quality management indicators to verify compliance with input, process, product, and process requirements; evaluate and accredit public and private institutions; accredit new curricula; establish minimum academic standards; and conduct regular academic audits. It relies heavily on institutions of higher education which provide it with the qualified staff responsible for conducting academic auditing, accreditation of institutions and accreditation of programmes.

Professional associations have been organized and actively involved in quality assurance. This is the case of the Quality Assurance Network of Higher Education in East Africa (EAQAN). It is a platform created in 2012 that brings together quality assurance professionals operating in the region; mainly those in charge of quality in the national quality assurance agencies and quality managers within the quality assurance institutions in higher education. EAQAN is hosted by the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) which facilitates the coordination, harmonization and networking of higher education institutions in East Africa. EAQAN also ensures the networking of these institutions with universities located outside the region. In addition, it provides a forum for discussion on a wide range of academic and other issues related to higher education in East Africa (EAQUAN, 2012). Motivated by the sensitization and training actions carried out by EAQAN at the regional level, quality professionals working in higher learning institutions in Rwanda met on February 24, 2017 at the University of Rwanda, College of Business and created the Rwanda Quality Assurance Network (RWAQUAN).

At the institutional level, the quality assurance system in Rwanda takes different forms depending on the institution. Results from interviews and analysis of content of document show that the majority of higher learning institutions have established quality assurance entities. In general, the entity encompasses a direction of quality

assurance which assumes the responsibility of all actions related to institutional academic quality assurance. The same results show that while the majority of Rwandan higher learning institutions have adopted benchmarks defined by the higher education council as the guidelines for their quality assurance process, others have adopted the quality assurance models developed abroad. It is the example of Kigali Institute of Management (KIM) that has adopted the ISO 9001:2015 and the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA) that has adopted the quality assurance instruments developed by the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA). Very few institutions in Rwanda have developed their own tools of questioning their quality process. The analysis of interview and document show that only the Adventist University of Central Africa has developed its own quality assurance system entitled "pillars of evaluation and monitoring of academic quality".

In general, higher learning institutions prefer the self-assessment based on a questionnaire or an evaluation form developed by the teams mandated by the higher education council. Two factors push institutions towards this preferential tendency towards self-assessment. First, the quality assurance process is very expensive. It requires enormous material, financial and human means. It is not affordable for many Rwandan institutions whose capacities remain very low. As the Rwandan national quality assurance agency (higher education council) does not have the resources to carry out all the necessary procedures for quality assurance, it encourages higher learning institutions to make their own self-assessment on which to base the academic audit actions, institutional accreditation and programme accreditation. Second, different research shows that the self-assessment process has very positive effects in higher education institutions. It strengthens the culture of quality within institutions. It fosters social cohesion and teamwork among staff while enhancing the accountability of staff to the outcomes of the process. It enables institutions to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, while raising awareness among academic staff about key performance indicators. It also allows institutions to build their capacities through internal observation (Materu, 2007).

Challenges of Quality Assurance in Rwanda

Results from interview and analysed documents show that the main challenge of quality assurance in Rwanda is related to the fact that the structured quality assurance process at institutional and national level is very recent and is still at the gestational level. Thus, their structures are not yet stabilized and changes are common. This creates a problem of stability. In addition, interviewees highlighted the fact that the majority of education actors (even those who are in charge of quality) do not understand the nature and function of the quality assurance process. Therefore, there is always misunderstanding on the scope and responsibilities of quality assurance offices that were created within the Higher learning institutions. The cost of a full scale quality system is unaffordable for the majority of higher learning institutions in Rwanda. In addition, the problem of lack of trained and experienced human resources was observed at national and institutional level.

The definition of quality is ambiguous. Thus, national policymakers, national education planners, institution administrators and managers as well as education actors on the ground have their own logic and different perceptions on the quality assurance process. In addition, they have a certain autonomy which persuades them to refuse certain prescriptions and proposals given to them. This phenomenon results in conflicts which are sometimes open.

Even though professional associations have been organized and actively involved in quality assurance, experience shows that in countries where these associations are operational, their mandates overlap and intertwine with those of the national quality assurance agencies. Conflicts are so common that the majority of associations have opted for an independent status that allows them to gain autonomy from national quality assurance agencies. This autonomy deprives these associations of financial support by the government. Therefore, unlike the national quality assurance agencies, which are largely funded by the government, associations of quality assurance professionals are funded from the contributions of their members. In the absence of adequate funding, the implementation of their initiatives is limited to meetings, seminars and workshops that serve as a forum for discussions on academic quality. The results from interviews show that Rwanda Quality Assurance Network is no exception to the rule. Though it was created very recently, it faces the same challenges in terms of collaboration and funding.

Conclusion

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The economic foundations of contemporary society are leading to far-reaching transformations and unprecedented diversity within the higher education system in Rwanda. These foundations presuppose the quest for efficiency and accountability. They involve the development and application of measurable indicators to evaluate the results of actions taken. Thus, the higher learning institutions operating in Rwanda have adjusted their structures, methods of assessment, curricula, teaching and learning methods, in order to adapt to the new requirements of modern society. Increased attention is therefore paid to quality assurance as an essential factor in ensuring the relevance of higher education. It is in this context that different initiatives for regulation and evaluation of the higher education system have been implemented at the national and institutional levels.

The reality on the ground shows that although the quality assurance mechanisms have been adopted, the higher education system faces different challenges such as lack of funds, lack of trained and experienced human resources, and ambiguity in quality process definition amongst others. These challenges prevent the implementation of a full scale quality assurance system. The quality assurance process that is implemented is thus essentially based on institutional self-evaluation. Therefore, the quality assurance entities are limited on the actions of validating the missions, objectives and practices of higher education institutions. Their role of regulation and evaluation has been transformed into a validation role.

In addition, due to lack of financial resources and skilled quality assurance personnel, the process of self-assessment is limited to scrutiny of inputs (procedures for the admission of students; the conformity of study programmes with the philosophy and objectives of the institution, the state of infrastructure, mainly classrooms and libraries; procedures for recruitment and promotion of staff, and the like). It does not focus on outputs (the performance of laureates on labour market, tracer study), procedures (the methods of teaching and evaluation of teaching-learning process in the classroom) and the interactions of stakeholders in the education system (partnership between stakeholder and ownership of philosophies and missions). The process analyses the logistics and measures deployed internally to achieve academic quality without paying systematic attention to the external effects of those applied measures.

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