

## STAKEHOLDERS' VOICES ABOUT QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY SERVICES

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### Abstract

The ability of an institution to deliver services that satisfy its stakeholders' expectations is one of the most important factors for survival and success of any institution in contemporary global society. Until this condition is met, the existence and contribution of an institution towards national development becomes questionable. This paper critically analyses mechanisms adopted by the University of Dodoma (UDOM), the largest university in East and Central Africa, to obtain feedback from stakeholders for quality enhancement purposes. Using a case study design, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) techniques were deployed to analyse four major feedback mechanisms where two were regular and the other two were periodic. The CDA techniques used entailed analysis of written texts about stakeholders' quality demands in relation to an institution's responses so as to gather insights into power relations arising therefrom. These feedback mechanisms were: Student Course Evaluation (SCE), Graduating Student Exist Survey (GSES), University-Wide Study on the State of Teaching and Learning, and a Study on the Conduct of Field Practical Training (FPT). In addition to these four feedback mechanisms, papers written to describe the university state of performance were also reviewed. All documents were reviewed while paying attention to the cultural climate of the university and practices on the ground.

The results indicate that the organisational cultural climate of the university has for the past nine years of its existence, swiftly moved from being inhibitive to highly facilitative where the adoption of an open door policy has enabled development of confidence and ownership spirit among the university community towards quality enhancement. The adoption of a decentralised mode of administration since March 2011 has empowered each of the seven colleges in the university to devise measures considered necessary for quality improvement. At UDOM, different quality matters are regularly and openly discussed in-depth in relevant organs at both college and university levels, thereby serving as a unique strategy for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of quality improvement decisions. The two regular mechanisms for feedback—SCE and GSES are done online and the results presented to all relevant organs which are highly representative to ensure that all segments of the university community understand, own and act on different quality decisions with morale. The University-Wide Study on the State of Teaching and Learning as one of the periodic feedback mechanisms has yielded ground breaking results on nine themes: (1) Teaching and Learning Environment; (2) Human Resource; (3) Student Reception, Orientation and Registration; (4) Pedagogical Practices; (5) Library Information Resources; (6) On-Campus Practical Training; (7) ICT-Related Service; (8) Student Support Services; and (9) Links between Learning Experiences offered at UDOM and the labour market. The recommendations are currently being implemented while observing the timeframe set in the report. The other periodic feedback mechanisms-Report on FPT has recently been conducted to provide a comprehensive picture about the theoretical and practical matters of the curricula in different colleges. The results have been presented under three major themes: (1) Long-Term Perspective of FPT; (2) Short-Term Perspective of FPT; and (3) Implementation of FPT. As for the recommendations featuring in the former report, the recommendations in the FPT report are being implemented by different actors across the university. Finally, implications for the future are discussed.

*Keywords: Quality assurance mechanisms; quality university services; stakeholders' voices; Tanzania University.*

### Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) in higher learning institutions (HLIs) has in recent years received enormous attention and is typically characterised by regional groupings within which competition for clients and labour market is not uncommon. It is not a wonder that in the contemporary global world, efforts to strengthen external QA systems on one hand and internal QA systems on the other hand are readily visible. In the East African Community, member states are steadily moving towards becoming the East African Community Common Higher Education Area (East African Community, 2015) in which the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) plays a crucial role.

In the region, individual countries have established regulatory bodies responsible for institutional and programme accreditation as well as providing oversight for QA matters. Examples of these bodies include: The

Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) in Tanzania, the Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya and the Uganda National Council for Higher Education in Uganda. While these national regulatory bodies serve as external QA agencies in respective countries, individual countries have been called upon to strengthen their internal QA systems in their quest for provision of quality higher education. In a nutshell, the existence of a strong internal QA system in any university has been found to be central to quality pursuits (Materu, 2007). At the core of establishing strong internal QA systems, “Practices which enhance stakeholders’ involvement in QA of higher education” are considered the most critical necessity (Ryan, 2015, p.7).

The present paper discusses the efforts demonstrated by the University of Dodoma (UDOM) to put in place a strong internal QA system through stakeholders’ involvement in all QA matters. At UDOM, it is generally believed that the ability of an institution to deliver services that satisfy its stakeholders’ expectations is one of the most important factors for survival and success of any institution in contemporary global society.

### **Cultural and Micro-Policy Context at UDOM**

The state of affairs related to QA in any university can best be understood by closely examining its micro-policy context and the associated cultural climate. Overall, existing micro-policies and organizational cultures are predictive of the practices found in a specific higher education institution. Studies indicate that to better understand practices in any institution, an analysis of context-specific cultural climate is necessary rather than adopting a university approach (Gambi, Gerolamo & Carpinett, 2012).

The micro-policy and its attendant cultural climate at UDOM has been well studied and presented by Mtahabwa (2016). In this study whose focus was to understand how UDOM as a new university handled QA matters, it was found that since its establishment in March 2007, the university had gone through three main trends: *Movements for Quality*, *Demands for Quality* and *Discussions for Quality*. During *movements for quality* which characterized a period from 2007 to 2011, efforts towards quality improvement suffered from lack of cooperation from staff. In practice, two blocks existed - staff and students on the one hand and the management on the other hand with the former using different means like class boycotts, strikes, demonstrations, and extended meetings to pressurize the latter to improve quality of services. Mtahabwa (2016) described this trend as either caused by stakeholders’ high expectations for quality services in a new university or perceived or actual political activism. Unfortunately, the management, just like staff and students, deployed somewhat repressive measures to create calmness but this was met with little success. However, during this phase, statements from top university management - the Chancellor and the Vice Chancellor, for example, stressed the use of dialogue in problem solving (UDOM, 2007a; UDOM, 2007b). This tendency persisted until March 2011 when decentralization of functions to colleges was made. Before this development, virtually all important quality decisions were centrally decided upon.

The second major development in QA at UDOM was witnessed from 2011 to roughly 2015. The main feature of this development was for staff and students to withdraw from pressuring the management through deployment of more radical methods such as class boycotts to adoption of passive means when seeking for delivery of quality services. During this time, QA matters were left virtually in the hands of the management while staff and students passively demanded for quality provisions, hence, the phrase *demands for quality*. However, it was during this time when the first Academic Audit and the first Management Audit exercises were completed. The findings generated were shared in different meetings for quality improvement purposes. The typical feature of this phase was for the management to use all possible means to encourage students and staff involvement in QA matters through dialogue as well as effective implementation of decentralization of functions. These efforts led to third major development - *discussions for quality*.

Discussions for quality had their roots in the preceding phase where dialogic approaches to problem solving and effective implementation of decentralization of functions were stressed. During this phase, all stakeholders at UDOM considered themselves as belonging to one community. As a result, the post-2015 years witnessed heightened staff and students’ interests in quality delivery discussions. These discussions were invited during meetings in relevant organs while stakeholders, individually or in groups, were invited to share their thoughts with the management any time they thought necessary. These discussions were made possible through adoption of an open door policy. In this way, both the staff and students’ morale to devise and implement strategies for quality enhancement was typical of this phase. This analysis shows that the organisational cultural climate of the university had, for the past nine years of UDOM’s existence, swiftly moved from being inhibitive to highly facilitative where the adoption of an open door policy enabled development of confidence and ownership spirit among the university community towards quality enhancement.

## Physical Context of UDOM

Currently, UDOM is constituted of seven colleges: College of Education (COED); College of Informatics and Virtual Education (CIVE); College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS); College of Earth Sciences (COES); College of Health Sciences (CHS); College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences (CNMS); and College of Business Studies and Law (CBSL). At the time of preparing this paper, UDOM had a student population of 23,163 students (22,112 non-degree and bachelor students; 1,052 postgraduate students) registered into 186 different non-degree and degree programmes. The envisaged carrying capacity when the university is fully-fledged is 40,000 students. The land size upon which UDOM is located is 15,000 acres.

## Methodology

Using a case study design, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) techniques were deployed to analyse four major feedback mechanisms where two were regular and the other two were periodic. More specifically, trends in quality enhancement were examined based on stakeholders' feedback against the institution's reactions as reflected in different documents prepared by the University and other relevant publications. These feedback mechanisms were: Student Course Evaluation (SCE), Graduating Student Exist Survey (GSES), University-Wide Study about the State of Teaching and Learning, and a Study on the Conduct of Field Practical Training (FPT). In addition to these four feedback mechanisms, papers written to describe the university state of performance were also reviewed while paying attention to the cultural climate of the university and practices on the ground. At the core of the analysis process, attention was given on the extent to which stakeholders' voices were reflected in the relevant documents.

Hodgson and Spours (2006) describe *political era*, *education state*, *policy process* and *political space* as key to understanding any contested cultural resource - in this case, QA matters. In *political era*, the goal is to learn from past leadership phases and their associated results on the ground. In *education state*, the focus is on roles played by different relevant stakeholders while *policy process* embodies an analysis of who does what with a focus on relationships. Finally, *political space* refers to opportunities available to various interested parties to influence affairs in a particular issue. These four aspects were useful towards better understanding of stakeholders' involvement in QA across time.

## Findings

### Student Course Evaluation (SCE)

The Student Course Evaluation (SCE) exercise is one of the different regular mechanisms for feedback on QA at UDOM and has been used since establishment of the university in 2007. Initially, the SCE exercise was conducted manually in every semester; two weeks before the beginning of university examinations. The *modus operandi* of the exercise involved different instructors picking the SCE forms from Heads of Departments and distributing hard copies to the students for them to fill in. The filled in forms were returned to the Heads of Departments for analysis. To ensure that every stakeholder was informed about the existing QA affairs, the results were discussed in relevant meetings from departmental level all the way to the Senate through the Quality Assurance Board (QAB). The major categories of data obtained from students include those on quality of the learning environment, quality of instruction and quality of the course being delivered. It is important to note that all relevant organs are highly representative to ensure that all segments of the university community understand, own and act on different quality decisions with morale. The key stakeholders include students through their Students' Organization Leadership, the Workers' Union with exclusive bargaining power, the Academic Association, and the University Management.

Following results of the first Academic Audit Report in 2011, UDOM devised different strategies for improvement of the SCE exercise. In that report, one of the recommendations was that unless the exercise was made as objective as possible, there was a general tendency for students to either overrate or underrate instructors for reasons not necessarily professional. Some of the students, for example, could overrate a particular staff for just being lenient - dishing out marks to students irrespective of each student's actual quality of work. Other students could underrate a particular staff because the staff was firm, awarding marks that reflect actual quality of students' work. Hence, if decisions were made based on such results, the exercise would end up having less contribution to quality improvement.

Subsequently, to minimize subjectivity, UDOM through the Directorate of Quality Assurance (DQA) prepared guidelines for conduct of the SCE exercise. It was directed that the SCE forms for staff in one department

were to be administered by staff from a different department. Further, if any staff appeared to be underrated or overrated, a follow up study was needed to gather important lessons for the future. In all these processes, the Heads of Departments played a critical role in the conduct of the SCE exercise while the School Dean provided oversight to the exercise in a school.

Due to the fact that quality improvement is a process, and not an activity that could be conducted and completed overnight, UDOM currently conducts the SCE exercise online. This enables collection and analysis of feedback data from stakeholders much more easily. Any QA measure can hardly go without challenges. The SCE exercise, whether done manually or electronically, has been facing a challenge of students' fruitful participation for various reasons. Some of the reasons include the rather unfounded fear for being identified as rating staff low and consequently being penalized. This fear of the unknown is being handled through awareness-raising using the Students' Organization Leadership and the Management. In addition, specific video clips have been prepared for this purpose.

### **Graduating Student Exit Survey (GSES)**

The Graduating Student Exit Survey (GSES) is done online and involves final year students from different fields. At UDOM, it was first introduced in the 2015/2016 academic year. The main purpose of the GSES is to obtain feedback from students who will have stayed at the university for a number of years (a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 5 years) about their evaluation of the services provided by the university. These students are believed to have undergone both pleasant and unpleasant experiences worth reporting for improvement purposes. It is a comprehensive quality evaluation exercise whose intention is to assess quality of the study programmes, staff-student interactions, interactions among students, student support services, the extent to which study programmes adequately prepare students for the labour market, state of the library, state of the laboratories, state of ICT, and the extent to which students would recommend UDOM to Form six leavers. The exercise is usually done shortly before graduation.

For the past two years, UDOM has been able to collect rich and informative data from graduating students and has used the findings to improve quality of instruction and overall learning environment. To ensure that the primary clients of the university (students) value the GSES, actions taken to correct reported deficiencies are reported to students through the Students Organization Leadership as well as discussions in relevant meetings. So far, areas that have been reported as performing below stakeholders' expectations are three: the library, laboratories, and ICT. These areas are currently undergoing serious improvements based on findings from follow-up studies that seek to establish specific issues requiring interventions.

Contrary to the SCE exercise which faces fear of the unknown by students, the GSES has so far received very positive response. A possible reason for this could be the fact that the GSES is done shortly before graduation. Students feel free to participate in the exercise because after the exercise, they have limited opportunities for instructional encounters with instructors.

### **University-Wide Study on the State of Teaching and Learning**

The university-wide study on the state of teaching and learning was conducted in 2017. The specific objectives of the study were to: investigate the state of the context of teaching and learning; assess the current state of inputs for teaching and learning, and examine the current state of actual classroom teaching and learning processes at UDOM. The study was conducted by eight staff, one staff drawn from each college under coordination of the DQA. It deployed both qualitative and quantitative approaches using a cross-sectional survey.

In its executive summary (UDOM, 2017, pp. 4-5), one finds the following description of the study methodology. The data collection methods were questionnaires, in-depth interviews, documentary review, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and observation. To obtain rich data, purposive sampling of key informants (staff) and random sampling (students) was deployed. Information was sought from a wide spectrum of stakeholders including students, lecturers and actors in relevant units such as: Heads of Academic Departments, laboratory technicians, system administrators, examination officers, accountants, Dean of students, School Deans, College Principals, librarians, nurses, wardens, Chief Internal Auditor (CIA), Bursar, Medical Officer In-Charge, Directors, University of Dodoma Students' Organization, the Tanzania Higher Learning Institutions Trade Union (THTU) and University of Dodoma Academic Staff Association (UDOMASA). The number of informants in each Focus Group Discussion (FGD) session ranged from 5 to 24 and there were 38 FGDs. A total of 10,441 and 53 undergraduate and postgraduate students respectively participated in the study by filling an online questionnaire designed to capture

data on context, content and processes about teaching and learning. The qualitative data were analysed to develop main themes deductively and sub-themes inductively while descriptive statistical parameters were computed for quantitative data. This study was commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor-Academic, Research and Consultancy (DVC-ARC) and was conducted between February and October, 2016. It was one of the periodic activities for quality enhancement.

As could be seen from the description of the methodology adopted by the study, stakeholders' voices were expected to feature very strongly and in a comprehensive manner. Overall, this study is considered the most comprehensive so far done since establishment of the university. It generated useful findings that were classified under eight themes: (1) Teaching and Learning Environment; (2) Human Resource; (3) Student Reception, Orientation and Registration; (4) Pedagogical Practices; (5) Library Information Resources; (6) On-Campus Practical Training; (7) ICT-Related Services; (8) Student Support Services; and (9) Links between Learning Experiences Offered at UDOM and the Labour Market.

Each of the findings was assessed based on its role towards quality improvement to serve as a basis for categorization of interventions. Using this criterion, three types of recommendations were made: recommendations for immediate intervention, short-term recommendations and long-term recommendations. UDOM (2016) defines each of these recommendations clearly. Immediate recommendations refer to areas whose shortcomings cannot wait any longer to be corrected due to their sensitivity and whose implementation should not go beyond the 2016/17 academic year. Short-term recommendations concern areas whose correction had to be completed by end of the 2017/2018 academic year while long-term recommendations represented action points to be completed by end of the 2018/2019 academic year. In the report, each intervention has been assigned to specific actors for easy monitoring and evaluation of the implementation process.

### **Study on Conduct of Field Practical Training (FPT)**

Cognizant of the interconnectedness between theory and practice, UDOM conducted a study on the conduct of field practical training (FPT) in three phases from 2016 to 2017. The first phase of the study gathered views from students and FPT supervisors based in FPT stations. The second phase targeted collection of views from stakeholders based in FPT stations on proper timing for FPT and the extent to which FPT placements catered for both urban and rural needs. The last phase of the study focused on collection of data from FPT supervisors and FPT coordinators based in UDOM. Overall, the study used a qualitative research approach where FGD (for students) and semi-structured interviews (for FPT supervisors, College Principals, School Deans and FPT Coordinators) were deployed to gather data. Criterion purposive sampling (for FPT supervisors, College Principals, School Deans and FPT Coordinators) and random purposive sampling (for students) were deployed to sample informants.

Similar to the University-Wide Study on the State of Teaching and Learning, the current study on the conduct of FPT generated insightful findings for quality enhancement decisions. The first phase yielded information on when exactly and how to start searching for FPT stations; that is, a long-term perspective about FPT, what to do shortly before commencement of FPT-short-term perspective about FPT, and the implementation process. The second phase generated findings about proper timing for FPT and showed how UDOM took care of urban and rural settings when sending students to different FPT stations. The findings from the third phase gathered important lessons about FPT coordination and supervision, and revealed the challenges encountered as well as drew important resolutions for the way forward. Overall, UDOM is currently working on each of the recommendations made in the FPT report through engagement of different stakeholders.

### **Discussions**

The findings presented in this paper indicate a close relationship between what have been happening at UDOM and the evolving micro-policy and cultural conditions. One could fairly deduce that the state of the internal QA system in any university reflects the extent to which the micro-policy and the resulting cultural climate support or inhibit the success of an internal QA system (Mall, Brown & Cliffe, 2014; Millington & Schultz, 2009). The brief history about UDOM as presented in this paper alongside the associated QA practices sends a strong message to the QA audience in HLIs - quality improvement efforts thrive in policy and culturally-supportive organizational contexts and vice versa. At the core of the QA business in HLIs, stakeholders' voices are critical. With sufficient attention to stakeholders' voices, it becomes easy for an HLI to create a lasting quality culture (Kottmann, Huisman, Brockerhoff, Cremonini & Mampaey, 2016; Vilcea, 2014) essential for quality enhancement.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In the process of ensuring quality in any HLI, there is probably no single factor that could be considered to be more important than stakeholders' meaningful involvement in QA matters. All other factors seem to depend on this factor. Even in resource-rich contexts, stakeholders' involvement is all what matters. The study concludes that the central role of university leaders in the quest for quality service delivery is to engage stakeholders in QA matters by putting in place clear dialogue forums. Discussions for quality actually matter in the process of creating a quality culture in any university. Such discussions make stakeholders develop feelings of belonging and a sense of trust and morale for working tenaciously; all which culminate into delivery of quality services. Finally, *we will know nothing until we know that others know something and perhaps better than we do!*

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