External Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Need for a paradigm shift

By

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Abstract

Accreditation exercises have been carried out in Nigeria after the Federal government has approved the minimum academic standard. The first exercise was conducted in 1990 and 1991 and this involved 836 academic programmes across Nigeria University. A second comprehensive exercise in between January and March accreditation in 2000 in both exercise according to Okebukola (2002) more than one thousand academic programmes were accredited in all Nigerian universities The Universities Commission also accredited 1,343 programmes in 2005in 48 Universities and 5 Colleges. NUC (2005) This has helped each institution to evaluate its internal efficiency. Programme ranking was also aggregated into a ranking of all universities and using what is called the mean academic quality index scores which resulted from aggregating the ranking of individual programme. (NUC, 2002) A more comprehensive ranking system at the institutional level was used in 1999/2000 and in 2005 employing a combination of other variables namely: percentage of academic programmes with full accreditation status, compliance with enrolment guidelines, proportion of academic staff who are full professors, proportion foreign academic staff, proportion of foreign students, proportion of academic staff with outstanding academic achievements, internally generated revenues, research output, students completion and drop-out rates, PhD output, stability of university calendar, students to personal computer ratio (Jubril, 2006) The ranking of universities also helped to promote healthy rivalry as each university to put things in place to meet the criteria for accreditation. However, inspite of the laudable efforts of the National University Commission, there are still challenges in terms of quality. Most impact studies on external quality assurance reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to any effective transformation student tearing experience. Most effectiveness and impact studies have focused on the effect external quality monitoring has on staff, on internal procedures, or on management structures in higher institutions. It is far less clear what impact external quality monitoring is having on student experience. There appears to be little articulation between quality monitoring and innovation in learning and teaching. Indeed, there are few studies (Horsburgh, 1998, Materu 2007) that attempt to address the impact on student experience. Where changes to the student experience have taken place, this is just as likely to have been the result of factors other than the external quality monitoring (Newton, 2000 P 158 – 59) and at best, the existence of the alternative provides legitimacy for internally driven innovation. The paper therefore makes a case for self regulation. Accountability in the area of quality assurance is now well established in Nigeria, with self imposed quality assurance behaviour and practices now the norm. There is therefore the need for a paradigm shift in view of the challenges facing external quality assurance in enhancing improvement. The shift in quality evaluation, towards how institutions might be encouraged in their efforts to develop sharper focus on mechanisms and arrangement for quality enhancement, is timely. This approach is in line with the University autonomy bill in Nigeria. This is however yet to be fully operational. Jackson (1997. P. 165) lamented that virtually every aspect of academic practice is now subject to some form of regulation control or external scouting, in similar vein Williams stated that external quality assurance should be seen more as development opportunities to be exploited than ordeals to be suffered. (William, 1996. P.5) Each higher educational institution is expected to build its own internal mechanism that focuses on quality improvement to complement the external quality assurance mechanism. This is in line with Harvey (1996) who proposed that audited continuous improvement with focus on clearly on improvement agenda at the programme level determined by students conjointly. The compliance and verification element of the conventional forms of external quality assurance are replaced with an enhancement focus, since this is not system for the inspection of provision. According to
Morris (2003), “Where institutions take up the challenge of self regulation, the focal point for genuinely ‘light touch’, enhancement-led approach to quality evaluation, would be a university’s “institutional quality enhancement plan” or ‘learning and teaching improvement strategy’. In sum, the model incorporates meaningful and supportive dialogue between external review team and the institutions, in contrast to the practice of external quality assurance which routinely involves ‘game playing’ and artificial exchanges base around an institution defending its position based on quantitative facts. This tends to encourage a ‘focus on bottom up’ driven innovations, cross institutional cooperation and communication and a strategic approach which is integrated and focused around the theme of enhancement.

Policy-making and management of higher education have traditionally been concerned with maintaining and enhancing academic standards and processes. To do so, they used different instruments according to the administrative set up of each system. External quality assurance mechanisms can address the shortcomings of traditional mechanism for quality assurance found in both administrative realities. Indeed national authorities are often far away and not able to judge fairly the quality of academic programmes and institutions. This paper therefore makes a proposal for self-regulation with light touch of external quality monitoring, as this will enhance quality at the institutional level. There are important features to this model. It provides opportunities for institutions to demonstrate how it is making use of resources and expertise in the areas of learning and teaching enhancement.

Introduction

Concern about the quality of higher education is on the rise in Nigeria. It comes at a time of growing recognition of the potentially powerful rate of tertiary education growth, and it’s natural response to public perception that educational quality is being compromised in the efforts to expand enrolment in recent years, growing complaints by employers that graduates are poorly prepared for the workplace (Oni & Adekola 2000), and increasing competition in the higher education market place as numerous private providers enter the scene. All these have also combined to raise new concerns about quality. The organization For African Universities noted that ‘One way to guarantee that higher education is sensitive to national situations and offers value-for-money education is to constantly and efficiently assure high standards in the provisions of the institutions that deliver higher education.

To formally achieve this, a number of institutions have set up internal systems that ensure comprehensive training and best practices. Over time, these issues have become central to higher education, and quality assurance has assumed prominence nationally and globally, in higher education.

Concepts of Quality and Quality Assurance

Quality, as a concept, has been defined differently by different stakeholders. This is because it is multi-dimensional and mean different thing to different stakeholders. Also, different countries may tend to define these terms differently. This document adopts the following definitions of quality, quality assurance, accreditation, and licensing from Materu (2007) “Quality technically refers to —fitness for purpose. It encapsulates the concept of meeting commonly agreed precepts or standards. Such standards may be defined by law, an institution, a coordinating body or a professional society. In the diverse arena of higher education, fitness for purpose varies tremendously by field and programme. Quality in the
context of higher education refers to “fitness for purpose” meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by institutions, quality assurance bodies and appropriate academic and professional communities in the diverse arena of higher education. Fitness for purpose varies tremendously by field and programmes a broad range of factors quality in tertiary institutions include their vision and goals, talent and expertise of their teaching staff, admission and assess standards, the teaching and learning environment, the employability of its graduates (reference to the labour market) the quality of its library and laboratories, management effectiveness, governance and leadership.(Marjorie, 2004)

A broad range of factors affect quality in tertiary institutions including their vision and goals, the talent and expertise of the teaching staff, admission and assessment standards, the teaching and learning environment, the employability of its graduates (relevance to the labor market), the quality of the library and laboratories, management effectiveness, governance and leadership.

- Quality assurances is a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. (Hayward 2001). A tertiary institution is only as good as the quality of its teaching staff—they are the heart of the institution that produces its graduates, its research products, and its service to the institution, community, and nation.

—Accreditation is a process of self-study and external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize an institution and/or its programmes for quality standards and need for quality improvement. The process is designed to determine whether or not an institution has met or exceeded the published standards (set by an external body such as a government, national quality assurance agency, or a professional association) for accreditation, and whether it is achieving its mission and stated purpose. The process usually includes a self-evaluation, peer review and a site visit. Success results in the accreditation of a programme or an institution.

—Audit is a process of review of an institution or programme to determine if its curriculum, staff, and infrastructure meet its stated aims and objectives. It is an evaluation of an institution or its programmes in relation to its own mission, goals, and stated standards. The assessors are looking primarily at the success of the institution in achieving its own goals. An audit focuses on accountability of institutions and programmes and usually involves a self-study, peer review and a site visit. Such an evaluation can be self-managed or conducted by external body. It is an evaluation and assessment of an institution or its programmes in
relation to its mission, goals and stated standards. The assessors are looking primarily at the success of the institution in achieving its goals. The audit focuses on accountability of institutions and programme and usually involves a self study, peer review and site visit.

—**Licensing** is a process for granting a new institution or programme permission to launch its activities. It is sometimes a phased process whereby an institution goes through various stages before been granted a full license.

**External and Internal Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance can be either an external or internal process. External quality assurance (EQA) refers to the actions of an external body, which maybe quality assurance agency or another body different from the institution, which assesses its operation or that of its programme in order to determine whether it is meeting the standard that have been agreed upon.

It also refers to the review by an external agency (e.g. a national quality assurance agency) or body (e.g. a professional body), which evaluates the operations of a university (institutional) or of its programmes to ascertain the level of compliance with set minimum standards. External quality assurance is mainly carried out through the instrumentality of accreditation and involves, as indicated earlier, a self-study, peer review and a reporting system.
**Internal quality assurance**, on the other hand, refers to the internal policies and mechanisms of a university or programme for ensuring that it is fulfilling its purposes as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline, in particular (IIEP, 2006). Quality is a multi-dimensional concept, with no commonly accepted definition but generally measuring the level of realization of set standards or targets. Quality has become an essential intrinsic factor in institutional processes, including those of higher education. The related concept of *quality assurance* has also become globally important in higher education discussions. More attention is being paid today to the issue of quality assurance in higher education than ever before. This is not surprising as stakeholders in higher education are now aware of the fundamental and global importance of quality and quality assurance in higher education. Stakeholders who are interested in quality assurance include:

a) the students, who are the primary recipients of higher education and who the quality of training they get defines their potential performance in later life;

b) parents, who often pay for the studies of their wards and consequently demand value-for-money education for them;

c) governments that demand accountability from their higher education institutions,

d) the employer who demands well trained graduates with competences to effectively operate in the 21st century,

e) the institutions themselves, cognizant of the keen competitiveness in the global higher educational system, and

f) the society that benefits or suffers the effect of good or poor quality education. Therefore, quality issues have taken the centre stage in global higher education.
Indeed, most universities from inception design and implement various internal activities to ensure that certain agreed standards of performance are being met. One of such is the *external examination system*. The system involves the assessment of student examinations for compliance with curriculum content and general professional or global standards. In very well established institutions, the internal examiner may be from another department in the university but in most cases is appointed from another university. The external examiner must be a senior academic staff, usually of the rank of professor and is appointed by academic Senate of the university on the recommendation of the Vice-Chancellor following advice from the Head of the affected Department and the relevant Dean of Faculty. Most institutions in Nigeria as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa with United Kingdom links at initial stages carry out external examinations. However, this system is facing some challenges. In many African universities, the student population in most programmes has increased tremendously, so that an external examiner is unable to cope with assessing all students‘ scripts and projects.
Secondly, some universities are unable to fund the external examination system as the numbers of academic programmes and the required external examiners have increased significantly. There is also the *self-assessment system* in which the institution carries out an internal appraisal of its programmes to ascertain the level of achievement of its internally set objectives and standards. This system is distinct from the required pre-accreditation self-assessment, which is externally mandated.
Self assessment can be conducted at two levels, the programme and institutional levels, and is advisory to the administration of the level of permeation of quality in the operations and activities of the institution. There is the practice, further in the process, in which a professor or a senior academic colleague will sit in classes to listen to a young lecturer and subsequently advise the young lecturer on style and demeanor in the classroom. This may also involve the professor designing, conducting and reporting research with a young academic with the objective of improving the capacity of the young academic to conduct and report research. This practice is referred to as *mentoring*. 
Mentoring may be at the individual or institutional level. At the individual level, the young academic staff or a newly appointed vice-chancellor may opt to be mentored by a senior academic or vice-chancellor, respectively who serves as a role model to the mentored.
At the institutional level, a new university may elect to be mentored by an older and more experienced university in the development and operation of its structures. This is highly recommended for all new universities, to ensure they develop the form and essence of university culture and practice.

**Student-lecturer assessment** is another form of internal quality assurance in which students assess their course lecturers. While this is not often popular among lecturers, it has been used in many institutions to give the students a say in the quality of curriculum delivery and to limit truancy and possible excesses of lecturers. The quality of the students in a programme is an important basic determinant of programme or institutional quality. Consequently, universities are keen to admit the best quality of students. In most countries, *student admission* is conducted by individual universities using their internal systems. In Nigeria, as in some other countries, a Joint Admission and Matriculation Board conducts a general qualifying examination annually for all students wishing to be admitted into Nigerian universities in the year. Using the scores of the students, individual universities select and further conduct screening exercises to finally determine the students who are eventually admitted as freshmen. While the Nigerian case seems cumbersome, it largely settles the question of probity in the admission process recognizing the pressure on the university system which annually can only admit about 20 percent of the demand for placement. (AAU, 2010)

Internal quality assurance refers to each institution’s programmes’ and policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes as well as the standards that apply into higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular. (Visaceanu et al 2004)

**The Goals of Accreditation**

External quality assurance according to Martin and Anthony (2006) has three main broad purposes.

- Quality control
- Accountability / guidance and
- Improvement purposes

Quality control relates to the traditional role of governments in ensuring that higher education provisions are in line with minimum requirements of quality. Secondly, although external quality assurance is mainly geared towards accountability. It is commissioned by public authorities as part of their higher education policy agenda. It is frequently linked to concerns
over value for money, and creation of transparency and public assurance. To make higher education accountable and have it conform to standards set the public must be kept institutions “fitness for purpose, soundness of public satisfaction with them.

Third external quality assurance may be geared towards improving existing practices. To achieve this, it must rely largely on the individual or collective involvement of academic staff. External quality assurance according to Martin & Anthony (2006) will naturally lead to improvement.

Halmay (2003. P. I) also describes the objective of accreditation as follows:

- To point out the strengths and uncover possible weaknesses within the institution and to identity good educational practice;
- To determine the criteria for assessment and to promote the introduction of a system of internal assessment i.e self assessment;
- To lay the foundations for a system of quality assurance in higher education and thereby to promote efficiently of higher education institutions;
- By publishing the results of assessment to disseminate good practice and to uncover such new educational trends, when serve the needs of both the science and market (employers, students, and others ) more effectively;

To inform all interested parties in order to enable them to make the best possible choice and to promote a healthy competition among higher education institution.

**The External Quality Assurance. A Historical Analysis**

Development of university Accreditation systems of accreditation in the USA date back from the late 19th and early 20th century. University accreditation in Africa began in 1985 in Kenya followed by Nigeria in 1990 – 1991, and Cameroon in 1991. It grew out of a long history of the use of external examiners and the relationship of many Africa Universities with European institutions for example Fourah Bay college in Sierra Leone (1827) was affiliated with Durham University in England from 1876 and university of Dakar (Now Cheikh Anta DIOP University) was affiliated with University of Bordeaux. In Nigeria University College Ibadan was formerly affiliated to the University College, London before it became a full- fledge university in 1962.

**Quality Assurance Agency in Nigeria – The National Universities Commission**

The National University Commission (NUC) was established by Act No. 1 of 1974 with the primary objectives of ensuring the orderly development of University education in Nigeria, maintaining its high standards and to ensure its adequate funding. The promulgation of
Decree No. 16 of 1985 gave the commission the responsibility to lay down minimum academic standards of all universities academic programmes and power to enforce standards. The commission through the expertise from the universities prepared the minimum academic standards in respect of major discipline. The Federal Government approved the document for the disciplines in 1989. “The minimum academic standard provides minimum floor space for lecture, laboratory facilities per student. Minimum laboratory space, library, minimum ratio for effective teaching and learning in any particular discipline.”

The Commission as part of its responsibility has been carrying out accreditation exercise in order to achieve objectivity in the accreditation exercise. Certain criteria are used to assess the discipline or programme. Okebukola (2002) outline then as follows: “philosophy and objectives of the programmes, curriculum content: philosophy and objectives of the programme admission into the programme academic regulations, evaluation of students work, practical work/ degree project, standard of test and examination, students’ course evaluation and external examination; staffing – academic staff and non-academic staff, administration of the department and staff development programme; physical facilities when a include laboratories classroom facilities and staff office, as well as safety and environmental sanitation, funding of the programme by the university, library facilities and employer’s rating of graduates of the programmes.

Accreditation in the Nigerian University System has three stated objectives namely to:

- Ensure that at least the provisions of the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) documents are attained, maintained and enhanced;
- Assure employers of labour and other members of the community that Nigerian graduates of all academic programmes have attained an acceptable level of competence in their areas of specialization; and
- Certify to the International community that the programmes offered in Nigerian universities are of high standards and their graduates are adequate for employment and for further studies.

Programmes are evaluated and scored based on the following criteria:

- **Staffing**  
  32
- **Academic Content**  
  23
- **Physical Facilities**  
  25
- **Library**  
  12
• Funding 5
• Employers’ Rating 3
  Total 100

Each criterion has component indices with varying weightings as contained in the “Manual of Accreditation Procedures for Academic programmes in Nigerian Universities”.

According to the National Universities Commission, Nigeria, the accreditation status for a programme is determined after a summary of the scores awarded by each panel member is entered into the Accreditation Panel Report Form (NUC/APRF) which becomes the accreditation panel’s recommendation. The criteria for award of accreditation status to a programme are as follows:

A. **Full accreditation status:** A total overall score of 70% and above in addition to scoring at least 70% in each of the core areas of Staffing, Academic Content, Physical Facilities and Library.

B. **Interim accreditation status:** An overall score of 60% or more but less than 70% OR an overall total score of 70% and above but with a score of less than 70% in any of the four core areas identified in (A) above.

C. **Denied accreditation status:** An overall score of less than 60%.

The Commission also noted that there has been a significant increase in the number of programmes with Full accreditation status in the Nigerian University system (NUS). In November 2006, only 54.45% of programmes evaluated, earned Full accreditation compared to 68.7% in November 2007 (NUC, 2007).

Analysis of the results of the November 2007 exercise revealed that 74.9% of programmes evaluated in the Federal Universities earned Full accreditation status compared to 69.7% and 49.6% of programmes in State and Private Universities respectively. In the denied accreditation status category, Private Universities had relatively more denied programmes (6.7%) than their Federal (2.5%) and State (2.1%) counterparts. (NUC, 2007)

It however noteworthy, that on a system-wide basis, there has been a slight decline in the number of academic programmes earning denied accreditation status. This may not be unconnected with the fact that NUC has begun to apply the sanction applicable to
programmes with denied accreditation status which stipulates that NUC advises JAMB to place an embargo on admission into such programmes until such a time when the Commission is able to confirm, through a re-visitation, that the deficiencies which caused the programmes to fall short of the Minimum Academic Standards, and consequently earned it the denied accreditation status, have been remedied by the university concerned.

A trends analysis of the performance of academic programmes in the NUS indicates a progressive improvement in the quality of the programmes over the years. For instance, the percentage of programmes with full accreditation status increased from 11.45% in 1999/2000 to 68.7% in 2007 while the percentage of programmes with denied accreditation status declined from 17% to 3.0% during the same period.

Table 1: The accreditation performance of academic programmes in the Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of accreditation</th>
<th>Number of programmes accredited</th>
<th>Accreditation Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990/91</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>185 (22.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999/2000</td>
<td>1,119</td>
<td>128 (11.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/2006</td>
<td>1,670</td>
<td>748 (44.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>599 (68.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NUC Accreditation 2007

Impact of External Quality Assurance Scheme

There are no formal studies regarding the impact of External quality assurance schemes. Therefore, the following paragraphs reflect the informal assessment of the charges within the higher education system. The external quality assurance has helped to ensure that universities comply with minimum standard. Okojie also noted that ‘there are instances where the proprietors have injected unprecedented amounts of money into their universities in order to remedy the deficiencies identified during accreditation exercises’. He stated that in Kogi State University, Nigeria where more than three quarter of its programmes presented for accreditation earned denied accreditation status in one of the accreditation exercises.

‘When the result of the exercise was made public, the Governor of the state visited the NUC to consult on the way forward. The cost implication for remedying the university’s deficiency was presented to the Governor and within a month he released the money to the university, changed the management of the university and most of the university’s programmes today are at the full accreditation status level’

External quality assurance has also helped to improve the ranking of Nigerian Universities in Global ranking. With the enforcement of minimum standard, universities and compliance by universities, there has been tremendous improvement in the ranking of Nigerian Universities in Africa.

Programme Accreditation
Accreditation exercises have been carried out in Nigeria after the Federal government has approved the minimum academic standard. The first exercise was conducted in 1990 and 1991 and this involved 836 academic programme across Nigeria University. A second comprehensive exercise inducted between January and March accreditation in 2000 in both exercise according to Okebukola (2002) more than one thousand academic programmes were accredited in all Nigerian universities The Universities Commission also accredited 1,343 programmes in 2005in 48 Universities and 5 Colleges .NUC (2005) This has helped each institution to evaluate its internal efficiency. Programme ranking was also aggregated into a ranking of all universities and using what is called the mean academic quality index scores which resulted in from aggregating the ranking of individual programme.(NUC,2002) A more comprehensive ranking system at the institutional level was used in 1999/2000 and in 2005, employing a combination of other variables namely ;percentage of academic programmes with full accreditation status compliance with enrolment guidelines, proportion of academic staff who are full professors, proportion foreign academic staff ,proportion of foreign students ,proportion of academic staff with outstanding academic achievements, internally generated revenues, research output, students completion and drop –out rates, PhD output, stability of university calendar, students to personal computer ratio ( Jubril,2006) The ranking of universities also helped to promote healthy rivalry as each university to put things in place to meet the criteria for accreditation. The ranking has been seen as contentious in Nigeria but it has however helped universities to focused energies in improving its internal efficiency. It may also lead to institutions to plan their programmes base on the way ranking is scored rather than on academic and labour market needs.

At the programme level probably the most important consequence of external quality assurance has been the development of formal statements of expected learning outcomes. First these provide a useful guide to the establishment and assessment of study plans, making it much easier to determine whether the programmer’s purposes are fulfilled. Secondly, they also give information to prospective students and employers that enable them to make better decisions.

Accreditation has promoted an active concern for academic results attrition rates, graduation rates and time to completion are dated that not only must be provided, they must be analyzed and improved, and institutions are beginning to gather the necessary information to analyze it and act on it.

The need for a paradigm Shift
There are a lot of challenges facing the National University Commission, in spite of its progress in quality assurance in Nigerian universities. Most External review claim to encourage improvement whereas in actual fact, improvement has been a secondary feature, it is however necessary to examine claims for an improvement process closely. Does the external quality evaluation aim to improve academic or research quality and if so, how is that measure? Or is it really claiming to improve standard? Is the purpose to directly improve the student experience or is it to improve the way the institution monitors its own activities? Or perhaps the improvement amount to nothing more that ensuring the production of programme documentation and outcome information. As much as enhanced documentation is valuable, the quality processes need to be able to claim substantively more than the generation of documentation to be convincing in its claims for improvement. This also agrees with Horsburgh (1999; pg 23) that there are far more important factors impacting an innovation in learning than external quality mentoring. She concludes that overall, the greatest impact on student learning was the curriculum and the teachers. The most direct on student learning was according to the author was from teacher practices, how they help students learn and the assessment practices they employed. Thus, she argues that quality. Monitoring must focus on more than systems, inputs and outputs, if effectiveness is to be achieved and enhanced. Most impact studies on external quality assurance reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to any effective transformation student learning experience. Most effectiveness and impact studies have focused on the effect external quality monitoring has on staff, on internal procedures, or on management structures in higher institutions. It is far less clear what impact external quality monitoring is having on student experience. There appears to be little articulation between quality monitoring and innovation in learning and teaching. Indeed, there are few studies (Horsburgh, 1998, Materu 2007) that attempt to address the impact on student experience. Where changes to the student experience have taken place, this is just as likely to have been the result of factors other than the external quality monitoring (Newton, 2000 P 158 – 59) and at best, the existence of the alternative provides legitimacy for internally – driven innovation.

**The Principles of Self – Regulation**

Accountability in the area of quality assurance is now well established in Nigeria, with self imposed quality assurance behaviour and practices now the norm. There is therefore the need for a paradigm shift in view of the challenges fancy external quality assurance in enhancing improvement. The shift in quality evaluation, towards how institutions might be encouraged
in their efforts to develop sharper focus on mechanisms and arrangement for quality enhancement, is timely.
Jackson (1997. P. 165) lamented that virtually every aspect of academic practice is now subject to some form of regulation control or external scouting, in similar vein Williams stated that external quality assurance should be seen more as development opportunities to be exploited than ordeals to be suffered. (William, 1996. P. 5) Quality culture is more than —a mere set of rules and procedures which can be ‘mechanically’ negotiated, agreed upon and implemented.

In the quality culture perspective, quality is not beheld as a process that can be operated through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but as values and practices, that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels (e.g. by considering the subcultures in the respective academic subunits) and by various means at the same time. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. Quality measurement and quality control are undoubtedly important elements of such an approach (as they are of any quality management system), but they cannot be regarded as quality guarantors per se, rather needing to be embedded in an overarching framework that is in line with the institutional objectives and focuses on continuous improvement.
Quality culture encompasses a more implicit consensus on what quality is and how it should be maintained and promoted (Hunger and Skalbergs, 2007). The development of a quality assurance culture requires that students are placed at the centre of the quality assurance activities. This requires partnership and cooperation, sharing of experiences and team work with the aim to support the individual student as an autonomous scholar (Rizk and Al-Alusi, 2009). Okafor (2009) identified the following as requirements for developing a quality assurance culture in a university:

- Self awareness/purpose
- Self Criticism
- In-built/internalised quality system
- Quality ethos
- Sense of ownership
- Quality culture and internal quality process
• Shift from episodic to continuous quality system
• Shift from input to an alignment of processes to learning outcome
• Building recognition through research and selectivity
• Shift from being judgemental to developmental
Since quality has historically been part of the university culture, members of the university community need to change their perception of quality assurance as an externally imposed process. When fully accepted, Rizk and Al-Alui (2009) surmise that institutional quality culture will:
  • create a positive environment leading to continuous improvement;
  • increase cooperation and competitiveness;
  • facilitate change and ensure positive staff development;
  • encourage staff to take academic risks in enquiry and admit failure, when necessary;
  • engender student input and participation as equal partners;
  • provide a comprehensive approach for institutional development;
  • involve multiple internal and external stakeholders; and
  • quality assurance will not need to be implemented from above.
Each higher educational institution is expected to build its own internal mechanism that focuses on quality improvement to complement the external quality assurance mechanism. This is in line with Harvey (1996) who proposed that audited continuous improvement with focus on clearly on improvement agenda at the programme level determined by students conjointly. In similar vein, Yorke (1994) opines that there is a need for an enhancement-led approach, which has ‘a greater degree of reliance on self-regulation in the quality system, coupled with a relatively ‘light touch ‘ external monitoring system’ Jackson(1997p51) outlines the characteristics of a self-regulating institution with capacity to audit their own affairs as including:
  • Robust and effective internal review and audit mechanisms;
  • An institutional focus on self-evaluation
  • An appropriate level of external peer appraisal.
In view of the concerns for quality enhancement at the institutional level. There is therefore the need for evidence based, research-informed and enhancement led approach, as there is a strong imbalance between external regulation and quality improvement. HEFCE (2003) revealed that many institution are revising their quality assurance
processes and are releasing considerable energies in support of enhancement through revising institutional strategies for learning and teaching, establishment of educational development units.

An evidenced-based approach to quality evaluation from a self-regulation perspective will provide much insight into what makes improvement initiatives work, what the barriers to success are and how arrangements at the national level for quality assurance could synergized. Davies et al. (2000) describe it as policies that are “based in some degree upon research-based evidence about “what works and what doesn’t”

In the proposed model of self regulation that this paper is advocating, the underpinning rationale is improvement. The compliance and verification element of the conventional forms of external quality assurance are replaced with an enhancement focus, since this is not system for the inspection of provision. According to Morris (2003) ‘Where institutions take up the challenge of self regulation, the focal point for genuinely ‘light touch’, enhancement-led approach to quality evaluation ,would be a university’s “institutional quality enhancement plan” or ‘learning and teaching improvement strategy.

More explicitly, Harvey (2007) had identified the following characteristics as indicative of a quality culture in a higher education institution that supports this model:

- There is a recognition by academics and administrators of the need for a system of quality monitoring to ensure accountability (and compliance where required) and to facilitate improvement. However, this should not be a bureaucratic‘ system.
- Quality culture is primarily about the behaviour of stakeholders rather than the operation of a quality system.
- The quality system needs to have a clear purpose, which articulates with the quality culture.
- A quality culture places students at the centre.
- A quality culture is about partnership and co-operation, sharing of experiences and team working.
- A quality culture is about supporting the individual as an autonomous scholar but not at the expense of the learning community; there is a symbiotic relationship between individual and community.
- Leadership in a quality culture is inspirational rather than dictatorial. Leadership is at all levels in the institution and does not refer to just senior managers.
A quality culture welcomes external critical evaluation from a variety of sources including formal external evaluations, external peers acting as critical friends, and internal peer review and support.

At heart, a quality culture is about facilitating and encouraging reflexivity and praxis; self-reflection, developing improvement initiatives and implementing them.

In sum, the model incorporates meaningful and supportive dialogue between external review team and the institutions, in contrast to the practice of external quality assurance which routinely involves ‘game playing” and artificial exchanges base around an institution defending its position based on quantitative facts. This tends to encourage a ‘focus on bottom up’ driven innovations, cross institutional cooperation and communication and a strategic approach which is integrated and focused around the theme of enhancement.

Conclusion
Policy-making and management of higher education have traditionally been concerned with maintaining and enhancing academic standards and processes. To do so, they used different instruments according to the administrative set up of each system. External quality assurance mechanisms can address the shortcomings of traditional mechanism for quality assurance found in both administrative realities. Indeed national authorities are often far away and not able to judge fairly the quality of academic programmes and institutions.

This paper stressed that if procedures of evaluation and quality measurement are not integrated into a broader framework of quality management and development, they may well degrade to a bureaucratic ritual aimed at the compilation of reports and numbers. Although establishing a certain degree of routine is necessary for every organization in order to reduce complexity and ease the day-to-day work, the system may very well gain momentum in terms of self-reference and self-interest, leading to results without practical relevance.

In many cases, evaluations tend to take on a life of their own, emphasizing their own accountability function and complying with administrative obligations. Such developments are often characterized by bustling activities but do not necessarily meet the actual quality requirements. This is mostly true for bureaucratically organized evaluation systems, which signal that quality issues are taken very seriously, but without really taking them seriously (at least not in terms of an intended cultural change). Introducing a special quality assurance
office/unit, for example, does not make sense if the institutional responsibility for quality is 
(even symbolically) shifted to this unit: process ownership has to be resident on various other 
levels throughout the institution.

This paper therefore makes a proposal for self –regulation with light touch of external 
quality monitoring, as this will enhance quality at the institutional level. There are important 
features to this model. It provides opportunities for institutions to demonstrate how it is 
making use of resources and expertise in the areas of learning and teaching enhancement.

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