

Quality Assurance in Zambian Higher Education: A New Dawn

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Abstract: *The increase in the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly private institutions, has led to increased demand for higher educational standards and better quality. To achieve globally acceptable standards, many countries and regional blocs have set up national and regional quality assurance frameworks to set quality criteria and standards to be followed by all affiliate institutions. In Zambia, the government through the ministry of education regulated and audited HEIs until 2013 when the Higher Education Authority (HEA) was set up by an act of parliament. In this review, the functions and accreditation requirements of the HEA in Zambia are analysed together with the macro and micro-levels of quality assurance standards set by the HEA. Finally, the HEA is assessed against the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Guidelines of Good Practice to check its compliance with international guidelines.*

Keywords: Quality assurance, registration, accreditation, assessment, functions, setting standards, Advisory and Regulatory Services, Macro and Micro- level quality assurance

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the world has witnessed a seemingly never ending appetite for internationalisation of education and emphasis on quality assurance in education (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Universities have now become the status symbols of national identity for many countries. This has led to increased demand for higher educational standards and better quality (Martin & Stella, 2010) resulting in creation of national and regional quality assurance frameworks for higher education. The demand for quality education in higher learning institutions is evidenced by educational protocols such as the Bologna Process, the Brisbane Communique (in Australasia), the Bruges-Copenhagen Process, the 'EU2020' Strategy, ENLACES (in Latin America and the Caribbean), the African Higher Education Area and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training (Baumgardt & Lekhetho, 2013).

In Zambia, the Education Act of 1966, supported by Statutory Instrument No. 43 of 1993, provided a legal framework for the development of the education system in Zambia from primary up to university education (Umlilio & Mfundo, 2007). The *Zambian University Act No. 11 of 1999*, provided a legal framework for university education in Zambia. It guided the establishment and governance of university education and the conditions and guidelines for establishing private institutions and maintenance of academic standards. Up until 2013 when the Higher Education Authority was established, the government of Zambia regulated university education and set the standards through the ministry of Education. The Higher Education Act No.4 of 2013 established the "independent" Higher Education Authority (HEA) to provide for quality assurance and quality promotion in higher education, provide for the establishment, governance and regulation of public higher education institutions; provide for the registration and regulation of private higher education institutions; and to repeal and replace the University Act, 1999 (Higher Education Act No.4 of 2013). The duties of HEA are

principally advisory and regulatory. Funding decisions remain in the hands of the Ministry of Higher Education.

In this article, we review the function and accreditation requirements of the HEA in Zambia, the HEA's promotion of micro-and macro-level of quality assurance in higher education in Zambia. We also assess the Zambia Higher Education Authority against the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Guidelines of Good Practice (INQAAHE, 2007). We conclude the article by highlighting the questions that the HEA is posing to higher education institutions in Zambia.

2. Functions and registration/ accreditation requirements of the HEA

The higher education sector in Zambia is increasingly diversified, particularly with the rapid growth in private higher education provision and government's ambition to set up public universities in each of the 10 provinces. By the end of 2016, there were 36 private universities registered with the Higher Education Authority (Higher Education Authority, 2016). Therefore, the need to guide and regulate the development of this sector has been a priority of the government through the ministry of education. In 2013, the Higher Education Authority was established to improve quality in the sector and to establish a national regulatory framework for public and private institutions of higher learning (The Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2013).

2.1. Functions of the Higher Education Authority

The functions of the higher education authority (Higher Education Authority, 2016) are outlined below:

2.1.1. Setting Standards: The HEA requires that all higher education institutions registered in Zambia adhere to agreed standards regarding the provision of tuition, assessment and award of qualifications. The authority is responsible for

setting and promoting quality assurance criteria and development of common higher education standards. It is also responsible for facilitating interpretation and understanding of these standards.

2.1.2. Promoting quality assurance: One of the key reasons for establishing the HEA was to ensure that public and private higher education institutions provided effective quality assurance in service delivery. The role of HEA is to ensure that institutions provide documentation of nationally and internationally accepted internal and external quality assurance systems and mechanisms of implementation, operational plans, adequate facilities and resources, governance arrangements and sufficiently qualified staff. The HEA has established an accreditation system for evaluating higher education institutions as part of the quality assurance system in consultation with all relevant stakeholders including higher education institutions. Opening a private institution without approval of the HEA is an offence. Alongside the accreditation system, a National Qualification Framework (NQF) which will ensure adherence to acceptable standards of various qualifications offered by higher education institutions, was developed under the auspices of the Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) which established through the Zambia Qualifications Act No 13 of 2011 is now operational. Overall, “the HEA will promote and enhance quality assurance by setting quality criteria and standards to be followed by all institutions, ensure that internal and external quality assurance mechanisms are put in place in institutions, followed and monitored. It will also conduct quality assurance audits to all institutions under its mandate and facilitate common quality assurance systems in all institutions under its mandate”(Higher Education Authority, 2016).

2.1.3. Advisory and Regulatory Services: The HEA is tasked with advising the Minister of Higher Education on a broad range of matters related to higher education in Zambia. HEA is also responsible for monitoring, supervising and regulating standards of higher education in Zambia through coordinating the long-term planning and overall development of higher education for Government approval and ensuring that programmes offered in higher education institutions are relevant and responsive to Zambia’s human, occupational and skills needs. Over the past 30 years, the Zambian public higher education system has been faced with chronic shortages of funding, the coming of the HEA has re-echoed the need to plan the recurrent and development funding needs of higher education, across the whole sector or for individual institutions. Armed with laid down standards and procedures, the HEA will ensure public accountability within institutions and throughout the higher education sector. Considering that there is little or no cooperation among Zambian higher education institutions in the areas of research and attracting national and foreign grants, the HEA has set out to promote national and regional co-operation among higher education institutions. Last but not the least, HEA will provide advice on greater equality of access to higher education focusing on gender, socio-economic status and educational needs. This is in line with the United Nations sustainable goal number four which calls for inclusive and quality education for all.

2.2. Accreditation and registration requirements of the Higher Education Authority

The HEA has well outlined accreditation and registration requirements developed in consultation with stakeholders and consideration of regional and international guidelines:

2.2.1. Accreditation requirements: Applicants for accreditation to Higher Education Learning Programmes under the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013 are required to provide detailed information on the Learning Programmes which the Higher Education Institution intends to offer (Higher Education Authority, 2016). According to the HEA, this information must relate, but not limited, to the following: aims and objectives indicating the rationale of the learning programme(s) in relation to national/or regional human resource demands, a curriculum that clearly outlines the learning outcomes, teaching and learning plans, and levels of qualifications and articulation in the Zambia Qualifications Framework, assessment, Assessment methods including validation and security and arrangements for assessing postgraduate students, number and qualification staff of the programme (curriculum vitae for each staff must be attached), available facilities for teaching, and learning and research including facilities, equipment and networks. Applicants must also provide details about internal quality assurance systems that show internal policy, strategies and institutional mechanisms for internal quality assurance. Finally, applicants must also prove the available of financial resources to support the learning programmes.

2.2.2. Registration requirements: Under the requirements to register as a private institution of higher education, applicants must show that they are registered with the Patents and Companies Registration Agency (PACRA) in Zambia, evidence of financial resources, location of the institution, tax clearance, and proof of operational plan (Higher Education Authority, 2016). The operational plan must have the core requires which are governance and management, academic programmes, student Admission and learner support, Staff, financial resources, physical infrastructure. The non-core requirements to be included in the application include Vision, Mission and Strategy of the institution, research strategy, technological infrastructure and health and safety.

3. Promotion of micro-level of quality assurance in higher education in Zambia

Micro-level of quality assurance refers to the internal quality assurance mechanisms and audit systems of the high education provider and the elements over which the provider has control (Baumgardt & Lekhetso, 2013). Institutional internal quality assurance systems are key to providing auditable educational programmes whose aims, objectives are relevant to country and regional human resource and skills needs. When the internal assurance systems are of acceptable standards, the system will automatically demand improved curricula for programmes, employ qualified staff, improved assessment and validation methods, availability of resources to support the learning programmes and quality of enrolled students. The all-encompassing accreditation and micro-quality assurance standards set by HEA are in line

with the parameters of quality in higher education model developed by Zaki & Rashidi, 2013. As outlined its core functions, registration and accreditations requirements, the HEA is responsible for setting and promoting quality assurance criteria and development of common higher education standards that promote educational outcomes responsive to the skills needs of Zambia (Higher Education Authority, 2016).

The clearly set HEA accreditation standards and National Qualification Framework (NQF) ensures that only institutions that show proof of existing micro-quality assurance systems and meet other standards are registered. Existence of micro-quality assurance systems in institutions of higher learning make it easy for HEA to audit programmes based on set standards. Since the HEA accreditation standards are agreed up on by all stakeholders, common for all institutions and are backed by the Higher Education Act of 2013, every institution is liable to these standards and any erring institution may be disciplined according to laid down procedure. This is a new dawn for higher education provision in Zambia and a beacon of hope for establishment of common institutional micro-quality assurance systems in a diversified higher education environment. It is and will no longer be business as usual for educational institutions in Zambia.

4. Promotion of macro-level of quality assurance in higher education in Zambia

Although the elements of micro-quality assurance systems are important, they are influenced by external factors such as politics, economics, marketisation, internationalisation, and globalisation. (Baumgardt & Lekhetho, 2013). The mandate of the HEA took a holistic approach in order to take care of the external factors. For example, the HEA has taken care of the political factors by playing the advisory role to the minister of higher education on matters related to higher education in Zambia. Through coordinating the long-term planning and overall development of higher education in Zambia, it ensures that financial/economic and political support from government is available particularly that funding decisions and research support still lie with the ministry of higher education. This has its own risks of over

entertaining political control of regulation of higher institutions but so far so good particularly in this early stage. The HEA has also set out to promote recurrent and development funding needs of higher education in order to reduce the gap with higher learning institutions from other countries. The mentality of “business as usual” by institutions will no longer be entertained as the HEA has prioritised public accountability within institutions and throughout the higher education sector. To counter the pressures that come with internationalisation of institutions, the HEA has called for greater improvement in standards and cooperation among Zambian universities in academic excellence and research in order to attract national, regional and international students and research grants. With these accreditation standards and cooperation with regional and international higher education regulatory bodies, it is envisioned that any student from Zambia, whether from public or private institutions will be accepted to work anywhere in the world or undertake any postgraduate training at any university without going through unnecessary entry examinations. The push by HEA for regional cooperation and holistic approach to higher education is a sign that Zambia sees its education future as closely tied to developments elsewhere, and its capability to forge ties with foreign institutions.

5. Assessment of the HEA against the International guidelines of good practice

In this section, the HEA quality assurance systems are assessed against the guidelines of good practice developed by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE). The following key aspects of the guidelines will be used: governance, resources, auditing the quality assurance of national quality assurance agencies, reporting public information, relationship between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions, requirements for institutional and programme performance, requirements for institutional self-evaluation and reporting to the quality assurance agency, evaluation of institutions and programmes, and transnational or cross-border higher education. The assessment findings and comments are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment of HEA compliance with INQAAHE Guidelines of Good quality assurance practice

	<i>Guideline</i>	<i>Findings of the Assessment</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1.Governance	INQAAHE requires that national quality assurance agencies have a mission statement that reflects their existence and responsibilities. The governance structure must be appropriate, allowing the organisation to carry out its mandate efficiently and effectively.	The HEA complies fully with this guideline	HEA has a written mission statement aligned with Zambia's priorities and the 2013 Higher Education Act No.4, which identifies quality assurance and regulation of higher education institutions as its major activity. It has an appropriate governance structure.
2.Resources	INQAAHE recommends that national quality assurance agencies must have adequate human and financial resources to conduct quality assurance audits in accordance with its mission statement and methodological approach.	HEA meets most aspects of this requirement even though it is still in its infancy.	The HEA is still in its infancy and more staff are yet to be recruited. However, the current staff are capable of carrying out its mandate and have clearly defined roles. The government of Zambia through the ministry of higher education is providing financial resources.

3. Auditing the quality assurance of national quality assurance agencies	The INQAAHE recommends that national quality assurance must have system to audit the quality assurance of their own activities and conduct internal self-reviews of their own activities. Agencies must also be subject to external reviews regularly.	The HEA has put in place systems to audit the quality assurance of its activities but no reports have been publicised so far. Reports of regular external reviews have also not been publicised.	For the purposes of improving the quality assurance of HEA and its development, internal quality assurance mechanisms such as feedback from institutions, surveys, commissioned reports and its research studies are required in this infancy stage in order to build confidence in stakeholders. The HEA must apply for regular external reviews by regional and international bodies of good practice.
4. The relationship between national quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions	The INQAAHE advises that higher learning institutions should be responsible for developing their own quality assurance systems and their academic autonomy should be respected. It also recommends that standards or criteria should be developed in consultation with all stakeholders.	The HEA recognises that implementation of quality assurance measures is the responsibility of higher education institutions and their independence is respected. The Higher Education act of 2013 and subsequent documents have been developed in consultation with stakeholders	The relationship between the HEA and institutions of higher learning is good and consultations must continue in order to build confidence.

5. Requirements for institution & programme Performance	INQAAHE recommends that national quality assurance agencies should have documents that indicate clearly what they expect of every institution under their mandate. The laid down standards must be appropriate for the core and non-core activities of institutions of higher education or programmes.	The HEA has all the registration and accreditation documents that indicate clearly what the EQAA expects of every institution under its mandate. All the institutions have been availed these standards.	HEA is the process of carrying out programme reviews and all institutions under its mandate have been requested to submit their programmes for evaluation. A total 36 private higher learning institutions that met the registration requirements were registered in 2016. Since HEA is still in its infancy, the programme is ongoing and more relevant standard will be developed over the next few years
6. Reporting public information	INQAAHE advises that national quality assurance agencies must inform and respond to the public in accordance with applicable legislation including disclosures of its relevant documentation such as policies, procedures and criteria. Agencies should also demonstrate public accountability by reporting its decisions about institutions and programmes.	The HEA has all its documentation on the website and communicates decisions about institutions of higher learning. The HEA is yet to disclose to the public the decisions about itself resulting from any external reviews of its own performance. By law HEA is expected to gazette and publish registered HEIs and accredited learning programmes. This is in the Act and is being done	HEA makes disclosure of all its relevant documentation, criteria and procedures through publications and its website. Financial management is reported by the Auditor General's office.
7. Requirements for institutional Self-Evaluation	National quality assurance agencies must have clear documentation concerning the requirements, procedures and expectations for self-evaluation. The standards and criteria used to include the format should be clearly outlined.	The development of self-evaluation documentation is ongoing. A lot of work must be done in this aspect to develop the required documents.	A lot of work must be done in this aspect.
8. Evaluation of Institutions & Programmes	INQAAHE recommends that agencies must have clear documentation concerning the external evaluation stating the standards used, assessment methods and processes, decision criteria, and other information necessary for external review.	HEA has set out standards for registration and accreditation of institutions and programmes making it easy to conduct evaluation of institutions and programmes. There are clear rules regarding external evaluators.	The HEA is in the right direction to conduct institutional and programme evaluation considering the availability of documents.
9. Transnational /Cross-Border Higher Education	The INQAAHE advises that national quality assurance agencies must have policies relating to both imported and exported higher education and may consider relevant guidelines issued by international agencies	The HEA considered all relevant guidelines promoted by international agencies and associations during development of the standards, policies and practices. It is also promoting regional cooperation on higher education standards.	The HEA has outlined in its functions the need to promote regional and international cooperation.

6. Conclusion

The Higher Education Authority quality assurance systems will help universities to answer the following questions: Do we have the right programs for Zambia and the region? Do we have qualified academic and non-academic staff to deliver those programs? Do we achieve what we want to do in quality education delivery? Do our students graduate and fit into the job market nationally and regionally? In other words, the HEA has brought about a call for Zambian institutions to develop both micro and macro quality assurance systems and to verify their conformity with standard requirements of inputs, procedures, processes, and products. HEA quality assurance systems and accreditation requirements have brought about a new dawn of hope for quality higher education provision in Zambia.

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