A Self-study of Innovation in Quality Assurance at the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a self-study of the innovative policies, practices, methods, systems and instruments that have been used by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education to assure quality in the constantly changing higher education environment. The aim of the paper is to provide information to countries still developing quality assurance frameworks. The author underscore the role of motivation in creating fertile ground for innovation and creativity.

Keywords: innovation, quality assurance, self-study, accreditation

Introduction

The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established through an Act of Parliament in 2006. ZIMCHE is the competent authority registering, accrediting, auditing and the holistic quality assurance of higher education institutions and their programmes. Quality assurance is targeted at safeguarding the quality of higher education in Zimbabwe. In pursuance to this goal, ZIMCHE develops and continuously improves policies, methods, standards, instruments and tools for use assuring and enhancing quality. This stems from the realisation that as systems evolve and the higher education arena changes, quality assurance (QA) bodies need to continuously adjust in order to achieve their goals. ZIMCHE finds it unnecessary to re-invent the wheel; it benchmarks its practices with other world class QA agencies, adapts and innovates.

The technologies of QA

In this paper innovation in QA is defined as the introduction of new or positive changes in policies, methods, systems and instruments that help to enhance quality. It is important to note that innovation does not necessarily allude to absolute novelty but includes the use of new ideas to build upon existing research, knowledge and practice in order to improve experiences and performance (Hesselbein *et al.*, 2002). Innovation empowers organisations with the flexibility that is necessary to survive in a dynamic higher education environment.

Zhang and Yongjian (2016) argue that the ideology of quality assurance in higher education has guided the current thinking and ideals of higher education. Accordingly, QA policies, standards, methodologies, instruments, tools and guidelines can be considered to be the technologies of QA. These differ depending

on the contexts of different countries. For example, accreditation, quality assessment, auditing, and benchmarking were the mainstay of quality assurance in the European Union higher education space (Zhao 2008). Quality can be assessed using objective measurements or indicators (Xu 2012) that enable quality enhancement and accountability. As Peter Ewell (2008) aptly assesses, no matter how good the QA technology used, it cannot cater for the whole barrage of emerging higher education complexities, hence the methodologies ought to be continuously improved and complimented by new ones. It is within the confines of this wisdom that this paper is premised on highlighting the QA technologies that have been adopted, adapted and created by ZIMCHE in its endeavour to assure and enhance the quality of higher education.

Methodology

This author of this paper utilises the self-study methodology because of its suitability for studying academic and professional settings (Borko, Liston and Whitcomb, 2007; Hamilton and Pinnegar, 1998, 2014; LaBoskey, 2004; Pinnegar, 1998; Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009). Self-study is a planned and systematic self-strengthening process of institutional reflection and diagnosis that provides feedback on how well it is performing (Samaras, 2011). Self study was shaped by teaches who used reflective inquiry into their personal experiences as a way of improving practice (Lassonde, Galman & Kosnik, 2009; Samaras & Freese, 2009). Finally, action research contributed to the foundations of self-study. According to Feldman, Paugh and Mills (2004) action research provides a method to conduct systematic inquiry into teaching practices.

Although some critics have questioned the objectivity of the self-study methodology, advocates for its use argue that its self-introspection motive and improvement focus cultivates trustworthiness and transparency (LaBoskey, 2004; Mishler, 1990), In addition, self-study results in institutional learning, enhanced communication, readiness for change and effective mandate execution (Henkel 2004; Sallinen et al. 1994). This self-study methodology is grounded on the self-study theory which propounds that useful experience and good practices emanate from a process of continuous self-examination, amenability to change and interactivity (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001; Dewey. 1938; Feldman, et al., 2004; Hamilton and Pinnegar, 1998; Loughran and Northfield, 1998). Wolf (1992) believes that the desire and ability to relate and recount one's experience develops knowledge and understanding of the profession. Hamilton and Pinnegar, (2014 p. 154) refer to the use of self-study in research as "intimate scholarship." Herein the author uses ZIMCHE as the organisational self and highlight ZIMCHE's experiences and innovative products in developing and rolling out a QA framework by adapting lessons from other torch bearer QA agencies to suit the Zimbabwean context as well as introducing innovations. As suggested by Erickson et al. (2010), the experiences and innovative practices of ZIMCHE will in turn be used as a compass by nascent QA bodies to effectively navigate their own QA pathway.

Innovation in QA at ZIMCHE

ZIMCHE policy framework

A key innovation was the development of a unique Act for ZIMCHE which empowers it not only with regulatory powers, but mandates it to also promote, advise and coordinate all issues that impact on the quality of higher education. Thus when registering, accrediting and auditing institutions, ZIMCHE focuses on both accountability and improvement. The benchmarking exercise that was carried out revealed that some QA agencies take the regulatory function only whilst some take a voluntary, self-improvement approach.

The process

The initial years after inception, ZIMCHE focused on creating instruments and tools for use in QA. ZIMCHE also worked on getting the by-in of HEIs and all is stakeholders. Awareness workshops were held at higher education institutions to disseminate ZIMCHE's mandate, philosophy and *modus operandi* to the academic fraternity. ZIMCHE also held workshops to develop standards, instruments, tools and methods for quality assurance. Peer Reviewers were identified according to the criteria defined by Council, these were inducted and trained on the various facets of the work they were engaged in ranging from programme assessment; assessment visits to HEIs, foreign qualifications and academic and institutional audits. ZIMCHE together with seasoned Peer Reviewers, HEI representatives and international QA experts, developed a Peer Review manual that marked a key innovation in this area. The manual includes the standard operation procedures for registration, accreditation, audits as well as assessment of foreign qualifications. It also goes into details on how to handle accreditation of the different academic disciplines.

According to Luckett (2006), quality assurance takes any of the following four models: bureaucratic, facilitative, managerial or collegial. At the institutional level, ZIMCHE puts the responsibility for QA to all levels: top management, senior management, middle management and at operational level. At the professional and academic level, ZIMCHE uses the collegial type of QA wherein staff and students are trained and encouraged to take charge of their work and to embrace constant improvement. Individuals, departments and institutions are given the responsibility to ensure quality. HEIs ensure quality in designing and implementing programmes using ZIMCHE standards and guidelines. On completion of programme design, HEIs submit these to ZIMCHE for accreditation. Institutions are then expected to complete a self-assessment report in preparation for the site visit. When carrying out site visits, student's views are also solicited in order to allow for triangulation with views from staff and peers.

ZIMCHE uses the managerial type of QA by encouraging HEI management to play a key role in ensuring quality. Vice Chancellors of institutions are expected to be the gate keepers of quality. Good governance, quality systems, strategic plans, student support etc. form part of the standards that HEIs are expected to implement. ZIMCHE encouraged HEIs to have institutional QA units (IQAU) that are responsible for promoting quality within institutions. Whist it did not prescribe on the exact structures for the units, ZIMCHE provided guidelines for setting up IQAUs. The HEIs who adopted the innovation of setting up

IQAUs acted as catalysts to the adoption of the approach by other HEIs since they became change agents in the higher education sector. One of the major achievements of ZIMCHE is the fact that all the 15 registered universities now have functional and robust IQAUs which have strengthened the culture of QA in HEIs. Management is responsible for reviewing the findings Peer Reviewers and overseeing the preparation of the institutional response.

ZIMCHE makes use of registration, accreditation and audits to monitor the standards of higher education provision in higher education institutions. Accreditation measures the alignment of institutions or programmes to the minimum ZIMCHE guidelines. It commences with the institution submitting an application accompanied by the appropriate accreditation fees. In the case of programme accreditation, the regulations for the programme are then sent to Peer Reviewers for assessment. The institution is then invited to submit a self-assessment report in preparation for a site visit. The site visit is undertaken by ZIMCHE officials and Peer Reviewers. Details of the review process are provided in Chapter … of this book. The recommendations of the content and on-site Reviewers are then given to the institution to solicit its input before the accreditation status is decided upon by ZIMCHE Council. The accreditation process used by ZIMCHE deviates somewhat from that the four- stage process reported to be used by most QA bodies as described by Ramadan et al, (2011). During the site visits, staff from some QA bodies play only a facilitatory role, whilst in some they partake in the evaluation (Stella, 2002). ZIMCHE plays a key role in driving the process of accreditation. In order to assure credibility and consistency, ZIMCHE orients and trains Peer Reviewers but gives the Peers the leeway to make independent suggestions and recommendations based on their varied expertise and experience. Whilst in other QA bodies accreditation is voluntary, in the case of ZIMCHE it is mandatory.

In utilising facilitative QA ZIMCHE uses audits to assess internal QA systems to improve quality. Depending on the severity of the issues concerned, the results can be improvement oriented or punitive. The *bureaucratic* type of QA is when ZIMCHE carries out institutional and programme audits as well as compliance visits.

Development and implementation of standards

ZIMCHE developed 15 standards to guide quality assessments and to ensure quality in higher education. This is in line with the accession by researchers that quality can only be improved through the use of measurements and benchmarks (Deming, 1968; Dill 1995, Fitz-Gibbon, 1996). The standards were distributed to HEIs who use them for internal quality assurance processes and to prepare for external quality assurance visits by ZIMCHE.

Conclusion

ZIMCHE's *Quality Assurance Framework* emerged through innovations based on best practices internationally. The need to maintain and improve standards in an era of changing models of teaching and learning demands that quality assurance agencies adopt innovative technologies that can weed out

malcontents in the education sector. Anchored in the management constructs of regulation, promotion and advisory, ZIMCHE uses innovative processes, instruments, tools to reinforce HEI capacity for continuously improving quality processes and outcomes, backstopped by the ZIMCHE minimum quality standards. This institutional (internal) quality assurance is balanced with rigorous external quality assurance practices to ensure and assure improvement of higher education provision.

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