



8th European Quality Assurance Forum

21 – 23 November 2013

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

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Deadline 2 August 2013

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Title: CROSS-BORDER PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY ENHANCEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE IUCEA/DAAD/HRK QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVE FOR EAST AFRICA

Abstract

This paper reports results from an audit of the achievements made towards introduction of a regional quality assurance (QA) system in higher education in East Africa involving the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), German Rectors Conference (HRK), and National Commissions and Councils for Higher Education of the East African Community (EAC) Partner States (National Commission for Higher Education in Burundi, Higher Education Council in Rwanda, Commission for University Education in Kenya, Tanzania Commission for Universities in Tanzania, and National Council for Higher Education in Uganda). The audit found that as a result of the initiative, the participating universities have now established QA units, developed QA policies, subjected programs to internal and external review and instituted policy frameworks. The paper concludes that cooperation beyond borders can contribute to significant achievements in the institutionalisation of QA practices in higher education institutions.



**CROSS-BORDER PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY ENHANCEMENT IN HIGHER
EDUCATION: ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE IUCEA/DAAD/HRK
QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVE FOR EAST AFRICA**

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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), German Rectors Conference (HRK), and National Commissions and Councils for Higher Education of the East African Community (EAC) Partner States embarked on an initiative to create a regional quality assurance framework for higher education in East Africa. This decision was informed by rapid growth in number of universities, programs, and student enrolment (Kuria, Hansert, & Nkunya, 2012, 6) and hence the need for structured and systematic focus on quality through established university systems, structures, and practices such as establishment of QA units, policies, and program and institutional audits. Participation was voluntary and Universities had to commit to contribute funding for the self assessment process and beyond. The joint initiative was carried out in the framework of the DIES program which aims at strengthening higher education management in developing countries and is funded by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The initiative was governed by an MOU indicating sharing of responsibilities such that external funding would decrease as internal funding increased. Eventually, QA would be locally driven. External expertise on running QA units, establishing internal QA mechanisms, developing standards and guidelines, carrying out internal program review, peer review, and other practices was borrowed from German partners and other international institutions to build local capacity in East Africa. However, the initiative emphasised on carrying out the activities together and synergizing European and African expertise.

This paper discusses results from an audit of the achievements of the initiative in 47 participating universities. After initial dialogue and sensitisation events, the process began in 2007 with the development of a regional handbook that harmonizes QA processes of the individual EAC Partner States and contains instruments that are based on international practices. This was followed with capacity building through training of QA officers (QAOs) on QA imperatives and then piloting the handbook on internal and external evaluation at program level.

The training was undertaken in both Germany and East Africa for a period of about 18 months in two cohorts in 2007 and 2008. It was expected that after the training, the QAOs would institutionalize the regional QA system for harmonizing QA practices in the region so as to facilitate comparability of higher education quality. Therefore, the audit informing this paper was carried out in order to (i) establish what was happening in the universities after the QA training and piloting of the handbook; (ii) document progress and achievements in the universities as a result of the regional QA initiative; and (iii) establish the QAOs' training needs for consolidation of the initiative.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were sent to every QAO who had participated in training. While the target was



the 47 QAOs trained, duly-filled questionnaires were received from 33 universities, two of them coming from college campuses that had not participated in the initiative. However, the QA officer in one of these colleges was among those trained in the first cohort but had moved to a campus whose parent university had also participated in the training in the second cohort. The second college campus had not participated in the entire process but had expressed desire to join the training in future. This meant that 70.2% of the expected questionnaires were returned, or 69.96% if the two college campuses that were not part of the initial groups of participating universities are excluded. The response rate was fairly balanced across the EAC Partner States, except for Burundi and Rwanda who, having joined the initiative late, had only one university each participating. Both Universities submitted the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Distribution of Respondents

Table 1 shows the distribution of the responses from the universities by country. The results indicate universities in Uganda lead in submitting responses, followed by those in Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda. There were more responses from the first than from the second cohort, at 54.8% and 45.2% respectively.

Table 1: Distribution of filled-in questionnaires by country

S/N	Country	Frequency	% Questionnaires received
1	Kenya	11	33.3
2	Uganda	13	39.4
3	Tanzania	7	21.2
4	Burundi	1	3.0
5	Rwanda	1	3.0
Total		33	100.0

The gender distribution among the respondents consisted of 57.6% males and 42.4% females, which indicated that the QA initiative has achieved an acceptable gender representation among the QAOs. However, although the gender ratio is better than the average amongst university administrators in East Africa, it is still desirable that when training new QAOs there should be greater focus on gender balance. Furthermore, there is need for universities to consider gender balance when recruiting QAOs and top administrators, without compromising quality.

QA Staff Stability

Sustainability of the institutional QA systems being established in universities in East Africa based on the regional framework depends on retention of trained QAOs in the profession. The audit sought to establish the rate of retention of the trained QAOs in managing QA systems in their universities. The results indicated that the majority of the trained QAOs were still in



charge of QA systems in their respective universities but a sizeable number of them had moved to other responsibilities: 45.5% reported that they were not the ones who had been trained in Germany. However, not all the respondents were QAOs, thus suggesting that the QAOs in the respective universities might still have been the ones trained under the initiative. Two Deputy Vice Chancellors (DVCs) as well as a lecturer and a school director also submitted responses. Two respondents did not indicate their positions. These results indicated that some of those originally trained as QAOs had either been given other responsibilities, relieved of their duties, promoted to higher administrative responsibilities, or had moved out of their universities. The high attrition is however not unexpected as many university administrators hold their positions on a contract basis. Reports by participants in QA forums indicate transfer of skills and appropriate induction of new QAOs in the respective universities.

Concrete Achievements

Establishment of QA Units

QAOs were asked to indicate measures undertaken in their universities for facilitating quality improvement as a result of the QA initiative. The feedback indicated that 75.8% of the universities did not have QA units before the initiative and 57.6% indicated that QA units had been established as a result of the initiative. The results also indicated that only 24.2% of the universities already had QA units before the initiative.

Establishment of QA Policies

A similar scenario was reported regarding establishment of QA policies. Thus, the results indicated that 78.8% of the universities did not have QA policies before the initiative, 18.2% had QA policies before the initiative and 72.7% indicated that QA policies had been developed in their respective universities as a result of the initiative. These results indicated that the initiative has had an appreciable impact on institutionalizing QA systems.

The universities were also asked to state the status of their institutional QA policies, for which the results are shown in Table 2, indicating that 93.9% of the universities had a QA policy in one form or another. There were those that had their policies approved but not published (27.3%), those in draft form (42.4%), and those with published policies were 24.2%. However, the audit did not seek to establish the extent of operationalization of the QA policies and of the challenges QAOs were facing managing institutional QA systems. This could be a topic for a future audit.

Table 2: Status of QA policies in the universities

Status of QA Policy	Frequency	% Responses
Approved and published	8	24.2
Approved but not published	9	27.3
Draft form	14	42.4

Total	31	93.9
Missing system	2	6.1
Total	33	100.0

QA Administrative Structures

Since the QA structures in many of the universities in East Africa are still new, the audit also sought to establish the administrative structures of QA offices within the universities. The results as shown in Table 3 indicated that the majority of the QAOs (57.6%) had the title of Director, running a Directorate, a Center or a Bureau, while 33.3% had the title of coordinator managing a department or a unit. The rest of them had varying titles, such as Head of Department or Associate DVC. These results also indicate that the majority of QAOs either report to the VC or the DVC-Academic Affairs (42.4% and 33.3% respectively). Only in one university did the QAO report to the DVC-Finance and Planning.

Table 3: Reporting structure of QAOs in the universities

Reporting structure	Frequency	% Responses
Vice Chancellor (VC)	14	42.4
DVC – Academic Affairs	11	33.3
DVC – Finance and Planning	1	3.0
Other	4	12.1
Total	30	90.9
Missing system	3	9.1
Total	33	100.0

In some universities, the reporting structure was less clear, with the QAO in one university reporting to the VC as well as to all the DVCs. These findings could be used as a benchmark for the universities that are yet to establish QA units. The results also raised issues that have been continuously discussed in QAO forums held across East Africa, where participants shared on the pros and cons of each reporting structure and also exchanged experiences on best practices. A status survey to establish how the cooperation and sharing of best practices has contributed to the institutionalization of QA structures in universities in East Africa is recommended.

Multiplication in the Universities

One of the expectations of the QA initiative was for universities to cascade program evaluation beyond the pilot process. Therefore, the audit sought to find out how many universities had done so. The results indicated that 57.6% of the universities were extending program evaluation while 30.3% were not.¹ Among the programs to which self-evaluation

¹ It was not clear why 11.1% of the universities did not respond to this question although it might be possible that these universities have not advanced the process beyond the pilot stage.



was reported to have been extended were Business Studies, Computer Science/Computer Engineering, Education (English Language), Animal Science, Medicine, Theology, Economics, Mass Communication, Engineering, and Natural and Applied Sciences, among others. In future it will be interesting to find out which universities will have institutionalized program evaluation.

Sharing Experiences

On the basis of QA activities taking place in universities as a result of the initiative, the universities have had the opportunity to share experiences, challenges, and lessons learnt while managing institutional QA systems. Some of the challenges raised during the audit included (i) high costs of bringing peers to universities for external peer reviews; (ii) keeping the university fraternity (including the managers) committed without an external requirement for the exercise; (iii) requirement of financial facilitation for out of campus retreats to write self-evaluation reports (SARs); (iv) high costs for implementation of quality improvement plans based on SARs and external peer review reports; and (v) how to deal with high staff turnovers and part timing (moonlighting) in universities in order to sustain quality to desired levels. In the audit, universities expressed appreciation of opportunities the QA initiative had afforded them to share experiences in dealing with all these challenges.

Strengthening QA systems

The audit also aimed at assessing the extent of strengthening institutional QA systems in the participating universities as a result of the initiative. Results indicated that the QAOs found the initiative to be strongly useful in strengthening institutional QA practices at their universities, as the majority (90.9%) of the QAOs agreed that the initiative had made their universities adopt or strengthen QA mechanisms and policies, with 57.6% being strongly in agreement and 33.3% in agreement, while 6.1% did not respond to the question and one university disagreed. Most likely the 6.1% of the respondents constitutes the two universities that had not yet participated in the initiative, which would then mean that nearly all universities participating in the initiative were positive on the contribution of the initiative to the enhancement of institutional QA practices. Similar statistics emerged with reference to the initiative having strengthened QA capacity in the participating universities, and the latter benefiting from the cooperation and exchange of experiences among the QAOs in the region, as indicated in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Contribution of the initiative to QA capacity enhancement in the universities

Response status	Frequency	% Responses
Strongly agree	19	57.6
Agree	11	33.3
Disagree	2	6.1

Total	32	97.0
Missing system	1	3.0
Total	33	100.0

Table 5: Contribution of the initiative to enhanced cooperation and exchange among QA experts in the universities

Response status	Frequency	% Responses
Strongly agree	18	54.5
Agree	11	33.3
Disagree	3	9.1
Total	32	97.0
Missing system	1	3.0
Total	33	100.0

Table 5 clearly indicates that universities believe that they have benefited from cooperation and exchange that has developed between the QAOs in the region as the result of the QA initiative. The responses from universities also reveal that the QAOs appreciate the enhanced networking, cooperation and exchange between universities in the region brought about by the initiative.

Peer Review and Quality Improvements

Pilot self-assessment and peer review at the program level using the handbook instruments was carried out in order to enable the universities to learn about strengths and weaknesses of their programs and to consequently develop and implement quality improvement plans. On the usefulness of the peer reports to the improvement of the programs under review, 87.9 % of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they were useful. Only one university (3.0%) strongly disagreed and 3 universities (9.1%) did not respond to the question. It is quite likely that the universities that did not respond had not participated in the pilot stage. On implementation of observations in the program self-assessment reports 87.9% of the respondents indicated that universities were implementing their program improvement plans based on the self-assessment reports. However, in future it would be interesting to explore what improvement plans were actually implemented by the universities.

Faith in Sustainability

The QAOs observed the importance of sustainability of the program review process based on the QA handbook and were confident that the process will be sustained. They also confirmed that their universities were supporting QA activities through provision of finances and personnel, as indicated by more than 80% of the participants. With reference to sustainability, 90.9% of the respondents agreed that program review based on the handbook instruments in the long run would be sustainable in their universities. However, some QAOs reported



frustration and the feeling that administration was giving them little or no support. This suggested that although good progress had been made and universities were working together, there was still a lot to be done to win some administrators, especially newly recruited Heads of Department, QAOs, Deans, and VCs to ensure enhanced internal mutual support on their universities' institutional QA systems.

Cooperation in Further Training

As a result of the cooperation among the QAOs, areas of common need for capacity building through training were identified. Given a range of choices in areas of training needs, and based on experience from previous training forums and recommendations from the mid-term evaluation of the initiative, the respondents identified tracer studies (93.9%), data management (84.4%), project management (75.8%), stakeholders' involvement (69.7%), curriculum review (51.5%) and learning outcomes (51.5%) as areas where they needed further training. IUCEA, DAAD, and HRK have been able to organize further training sessions in change management, tracer studies, and curriculum review, as a response to the QAOs' training needs. In line with the overall approach to make use of already built capacity and based on training-of-trainer seminars experienced African QA experts play an increasingly important role in conducting the sessions in the second phase (2012-2015) of the initiative.

CONCLUSIONS

The audit has established that cooperation beyond borders can contribute to significant achievements in the institutionalisation of QA practices based on a regional QA framework. This finding reconfirms the positive results of the mid-term evaluation which has been carried out by an international team of higher education experts in 2011: "Looking at the results of the project, it is evident that it has been successful in making quality assurance mechanisms valued and accepted by the main stakeholders in the higher education systems in the region. It has also contributed to enhance the capacity of a core group of quality assurance experts in different areas, both within universities and at the national regulatory bodies, it increased awareness about the need to involve external stakeholders in the discussion about the quality and relevance of higher education and pointed out the need to review the curriculum of study programmes (Lemaitre, Matos, & Teichler, 2011)." Thus, the IUCEA/DAAD/HRK QA initiative has been productive and has made an impact in the development and strengthening of QA systems in the participating universities, particularly concerning the establishment QA units and institutional policy frameworks. The audit has indicated that QAOs are committed to the process and have confidence that the impact of the initiative in their universities is sustainable. It was also clear from the audit that there were universities beyond the initial pilot group that were interested in implementing QA practices based on the regional framework. Efforts have been made to bring on board such universities and currently a third cohort is undergoing training similar to the one undertaken by the first and second cohorts. It was also clear from the audit that in some universities, difficulties have been experienced due to staff attrition, mobility and transfers, and resistance from university administrators who have not



yet bought into the system. Furthermore, some universities have also been facing financial constraints especially in the employment of peers in program review and financing their improvement plans. Since the IUCEA/DAAD/HRK cooperation has evidently helped to set up a regional quality assurance system in higher education for East Africa, there is need for further strengthening the process. Furthermore, the East African universities themselves are required to develop proposals for joint efforts addressing relevant areas in QA.. Some of the QA practices have now become institutionalized through national commissions with some countries, such as Kenya, enacting legislation to require universities to carry out program review regularly and systematically.

References:

Works Cited

- Kuria, M., Hansert, C., & Nkunya, M. (2012). *Regional Cooperation for Quality Assurance: The IUCEA/DAAD East African Quality Assurance Initiative*. Retrieved from www.adeanet.org/trienale/trienalestudies/subtheme3/3_3_01_KURIA_en.pdf
- Lemaitre, M. J., Matos, N., & Teichler, U. (2011). *East African-German Co-operation in Enhancing Quality Assurance in Higher Education: An External Review of the IUCEA-DAAD Pilot Initiative*. Unpublished Report.

Questions for discussion:

- 1. How can universities be made to adopt and domesticate a system developed regionally?**
- 2. How can regional cooperation on quality in higher education be sustained between universities.**

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.