

Exploring the Importance of Students' Input in Accreditation of Courses at Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract— Accreditation of courses in tertiary institutions is mainly regarded as business to be executed by the management and teaching staff. This is done despite the fact that some students with practical industry experience may be knowledgeable on the subject matter, which lecturers and management might not have. There is no evidence of student involvement and participation in course design or review or other quality assurance activities in Lesotho tertiary institutions. It therefore is in the interest of this study to explore whether student input can be of significance to course design and content. The study also seeks to unveil the extent to which an all-inclusive approach should be adopted by tertiary institutions to ensure quality of course design and content. Qualitative methodology, in the form of in depth interviews and document analyses is going to be employed for this study.

Key words: Accreditation, Tertiary Institutions, Quality Assurance, Stakeholder, Inclusivity

I. INTRODUCTION

The exercise of accreditation of courses at tertiary level is a procedure whereby institutions self-evaluate in order to establish the levels of the quality of the curricula delivered to students. The process is helped for authenticity by national quality assurance councils on behalf of the ministry responsible for education. For instance, in Lesotho, the honors' is with the "Council on Higher Education" (CHE) to assist tertiary institutions to achieve acceptable standards by the Ministry of Education and Training. Tertiary institutions should, however, take the initiative of designing courses that are in tandem with the expectations of the national economy as well as the job market. Tertiary institutions can achieve this by complying with the set national educational standards as informed by the Strategic Developmental Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations.

It therefore would not be enough for tertiary institutions to just focus only on management and teaching staff input in curriculum development excluding student input. The processes should be all inclusive, that is, taking into consideration contributions by industry and especially from the student body. Jagersma (2010) supports the idea of inculcating student input in curriculum development by saying, "that there is potential for increased learning when the student is included in curriculum design".

Deane and Stanley (2017) quote Dunne and Zandstra (2011) saying:

There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes.

Student input should therefore be explored in the spirit of all stakeholder inclusivity in curriculum development and quality assurance of education at tertiary level.

On the subject of student involvement in curriculum design, Butucha (2016) writes that due to the change of educational trends in the 21st century because of technology, student input in curriculum design is a prerequisite. "Academics and administrators have begun to tackle and rethink of how to enhance the engagement of students in this era of technology where students are hooked to Facebooking, sending and receiving messages, Tweeting and Googling, chatting and doing many other things while lecture is going on", (Butucha, 2016). Butucha (2016) goes on to observe that the, "21st century curriculum and teaching requires a paradigm shift in the minds of curriculum developers, teachers and a shift in the ways that instruction is delivered in order to keep students engaged to promote learners participation in the learning and teaching processes".

II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Curricula are designed with the student as the central beneficiary yet the contribution of the learner in the design process is not taken into consideration. When the Council on Higher Education consultants visits tertiary institutions for accreditation related reviews, the spotlight is usually on management, course content/ curriculum and students' input is regarded peripherally. In some cases students may have industry experience which can contribute to quality of courses being offered by the institutions but are unfortunately not given the opportunity to contribute more meaningfully.

III. STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study sought to establish the significance of student input in course accreditation in a quest to ensure quality of content to be delivered at tertiary education level in Lesotho. The study also sought to discover the extent to which an all stakeholder inclusion in course design will assure high quality education at tertiary level in Lesotho.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In what ways, and to what extent, do institutions empower, engage students to contribute to learning, teaching and curriculum development?

To what extent is the student's input valued for the accreditation of courses?

How do institutions judge the mechanisms in preparation for course accreditation?

What institutional processes and structures are least and most productive for empowering and supporting learners to contribute productively to curriculum enhancement, learning and teaching?

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is informed by normative curriculum theory. Curriculum is what should be taught in institutions of teaching and learning and normative theory of curriculum is the best theory to inform this study since it is a study focusing on what should be included in learning, teaching and assessment at the level of colleges and universities in Lesotho. Young (2014) writes that, "curriculum theory role has two meanings with the first one referring to the rules guiding curricular design and practices and the second to the fact that education always implies some moral values about the good person and the "good society"- in other words what are we educating for?" Normative curriculum theory is therefore the most appropriate to guide this study because of its all inclusivity perspective.

VI. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Accreditation of higher education (H.E) programs and institutions implies the requirement to fulfill a set of academic standards in order to be recognized as eligible for awarding degrees", (Maric, 2008). Tertiary institutions are subjected to mandatory evaluation for quality assessment (Maric, 2008). Alstete cited in Maric (2008) defines, "accreditation as mechanism to ensure accountability and quality in higher education"

Cheng quoted in Stander (2017) stated that sound internal quality assurance has gained popularity in the 1970s, which led to the implementation of policies to foster quality in the education sector. Stander (2017) asserts that in ensuring quality, program accreditation became vital for external quality assurance process in H.E in South Africa. Graduates from unaccredited institution are barred from registering with professional bodies, thus it is crucial for H.E to get professional accreditation (Stander, 2017)

Baryeh (2009) states that accreditation and assessment follows a specific process, which begins with self-evaluation by HEI's, followed by a site visit by peer-reviewers leading to the actual accreditation. Mavil (2013) asserts that accreditation "is the key vehicle for quality assurance in H.E and the major driver of learning outcomes assessment, but what remains a challenge is the accreditation process could be channeled to enhance student learning. The current emphasis placed on accreditation highlights a modification of the objectives of quality assurance policy in favour of a more summative oriented approach", (Mavil, 2013)

Kuh and Ikenberry cited in Mavil (2013), state that majority of institutions of higher learning are turn to adopt data driven approach due to the demands of the evaluators. Jagersma and Parsons (2011) stress the need "for student's involvement in curriculum development and design, stating students input and engagement yields positive results in learning, thus aiding accreditation". Rudduck and Flutter cited in Jagersma and Parsons (2011) write that students to effectively comprehend, they should understand the basis for course design. "To be successful learners, students must understand process and structure – naturally or formally. If they do not feel connected to the curriculum or course objectives they will become their own barriers to learning

through disruptive practice", (Rudduck & Flutter cited in Jagersma and Parsons, 2011).

Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) assert that involving students in quality assurance remains a crucial topic in education transformation, stating that a number of institutions are considering how best students could be involved. "Student involvement in evaluating and enhancing the quality of their H.E.I is carried out through specific activities, such as responding to focus group interviews and questionnaires, participating in QA related working groups, and involving themselves in QA processes", (Elassy cited in Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016).

Assylbekova and Kalanova (2015) emphasize that, "engaging students in quality assurance is one of the issues and principles of a culture of quality in the global education. In the United States, the students' engagement in the Accreditation Council as a member of the public is a recommendatory nature. Students provide information or serve a role of experts for the external audit", (Assylbekova and Kalanova, 2015).

Alaniska *et al.* (2006) note that introducing students to quality assurance processes leading to accreditation of courses afford students with much needed experience and also in improving the quality of education. Students as stakeholders in education due to financial investment and time, they have vested interest in the quality of education and the system they have enrolled in.

Boehme (2017) notes that it is essential for students to assume important roles in quality assurance as they have valuable input which could eventually influence the quality of education they are exposed to. However, students are hardly ever consulted in the external process of evaluation although they have direct interest in ensuring quality of their potential qualifications. Boehme (2017) suggests that during comprehensive accreditation, although students are interviewed during the process, this is not sufficient to reflect the true picture of the culture and learning environment of such students. Boehme (2017) also argues that students as key stakeholders and main ingredients in the education system, they must be engaged and their input must be valued. Lack of students input and participation in quality assurance and accreditation organizations are missing critical feedback to provide a holistic review of institutions. "The feedback provided by students—learners of all ages and backgrounds—can strengthen accreditation teams by teaching others what questions to ask and what should be included in the report", (Boehme, 2017).

VII. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology, in the form of in depth interviews and document analyses was employed for this study. Kassin, (2015) suggests that, "qualitative research guarantees insights and deeper understanding of a situation or a target population", adding that it is interpretive. Denscombe (2007) asserts that, "qualitative research is not associated with numbers as the unit of analysis", it delves more into the depth of an issue. The sampling method used for the study was purposive. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) write that purposive sampling encompasses the selection of informants across a broad spectrum mainly who are related to the topic

under spotlight. "Purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative studies and it is intended to achieve depth of understanding", (Etikan et. al, 2016).

Data was gathered through in-depth interviews. Boyce (2006) describes, "In-depth interviewing as another qualitative research technique that extensively covers the population uses a small number of candidates to get the desired results". The sample frame for this study was Council on Higher Education Quality Assurance officer, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology Communication Media and Broadcasting Faculty Manager, Institute of Development Management (IDM) and Quality Assurance Officer at Lerotholi Polytechnic. Self-Evaluation Assessment Forms from CHE was also reviewed. The qualitative method of analysis was used to interpret information from the informants. The researchers derived categories from the objectives of the study.

VIII. FINDINGS

A. Student input in accreditation

Informant from Council on Higher Education stated that students input are valuable, but it is not a determining factor whether the course could be accredited. The informant further stated that students are key to gather insights into the teaching and learning process. Before the evaluation, an institution sends self-evaluation reports; it is upon these reports that CHE will pay a visit to verify what has been submitted by the institution. This includes taking a tour to see the facilities, interview current students and alumni and university employees, both academic and non-academic. The informant from LUCT stated that it is mandatory during CHE visit that students and alumni are interviewed. This indirectly reflects that student's input is valuable for the accreditation of courses. Students are key stakeholders in education; they are the recipients of the service being offered. It is therefore essential for them to be included in the accreditation process. The informant said in as much as the University is concerned with regards to programmes currently running, it is equally important to know whether the courses being offered are relevant, and the alumni are a sign whether we are on the right track. The informant from IDM noted that students are not involved in curriculum design even the accreditation process. The informant stated that the institution is due for CHE visit in September, but however, stated that there has never been a time that students' input has influenced the accreditation of courses. Informant from Lerotholi Polytechnic asserted that students have no direct bearing on the accreditation, although it is mandatory for students and alumni to be interviewed to assess the level of teaching and learning in the institution.

B. Students input on learning, teaching and curriculum development

Informant for LUCT stated that students so far are the recipients; they are not involved in the development of curriculum. The informant further stated that, they are only included towards the end of the chain, when it comes to the sitting of the Senate in preparation for the release of results, that is how far they are involved. The informant from IDM noted as far as curriculum development is concerned, students are not involved, but the institution ensures quality through

involving a team of experts to assist in curriculum design and development. Informant from Lerotholi Polytechnic said students are merely recipients of what has been developed and designed by experts.

C. Mechanisms in place for preparation of course accreditation

Informant from Lerotholi Polytechnic said the purpose of Quality Assurance Unit is to play an oversight role to ensure that there is quality of the courses being delivered to students. This also includes preparing for proper course files which is one of the requirements of the CHE when coming for the visit. LUCT informant stated that the university has the AAU whose sole purpose is to ensure quality of the course, and teaching and learning process, leading to the examinations. The informant stated that, in terms of course files, this is done by lecturers, with the assumption that as experts in their field of study, they will be able to produce quality course/ teaching content. IDM informant stated that this task falls under the registrar who oversees that all processes are in place when it comes to accreditation of courses.

D. Institutional structures to support student empowerment in curriculum development

All institutions interviewed do not have structures in place to support students in curriculum development and design, as this duty has been left in the capable hands of experts with plethora of experience in different fields of study.

IX. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

CHE's self-evaluation report looks into the following,

- Goals and objectives of the programme,
- Governance
- Programme design and development,
- Teaching and learning strategy
- Internal Quality Assurance Plan or system,
- Physical resources and infrastructure
- Admissions
- Assessment of learner attainment.

All of the above, are solely the responsibility of the institution, therefore, the level of preparedness of the institution, and whether they will be granted partial or full accreditation of such courses are determined by the above mentioned aspects.

X. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Student contribution towards quality assurance and accreditation processes in Lesotho is significantly minimal. Research in Europe, for instance, shows that some economies consider student input significantly. Mirica and Abdulamit (2014), for example, writing about the system in Romania acknowledge that the "process aiming at improving the quality of study courses ensuring a positive impact on the students' learning experience should involve students actively since students are full members of the university community and constructive partners. Their involvement in the quality assurance process is both necessary and ought to be embraced", (Mirica and Abdulamit, 2014).

Institutions of higher learning should not assign a passive role to students when developing curriculum.

Stabback (2016) writes that, "Parents, students themselves and employees should be regarded as important stakeholders, elaborating that students are central in the success of their learning, and their participation in curriculum development process will enhance their engagement in the curriculum and their commitment to their own learning". Stabback (2016) further justifies the standpoint above saying, "that in much contemporary teaching, learning and assessment practice, students are no longer seen as passive recipients of knowledge. Students should thus be engaged in and contributors to teaching, learning and assessment".

To further emphasize the significance of student engagement in quality assurance in tertiary institutions, van der Velden, Pool, Lowe, Naidoo and Botas (2013) argue that learner engagement by authorities goes beyond quality assurance. Van der Velden et al (2013) go on to say, "that where institutions had considered student engagement within the wider context of the student experience as opposed to just that of the academic experience, further benefits had been reaped".

Crawford, Jenner, Liddle, Russel and Woollard (2015) carried out study on, "the student as producer initiative at the University of Lincoln; exploring possibilities for very different ways of working that genuinely enable student-driven participation and democratic practice by realigning the student- teacher nexus, challenging the power imbalance and moving from traditional accountability to shared responsibility". Crawford et al (2015) recommend, from their findings, that, "it is necessary to make changes to the quality systems and processes that incorporate the student- teacher partnership, learner- centeredness, value added and the quality of the student learning experience". Accreditation processes in Lesotho tertiary institutions should therefore consider more student participation as recommended by all the scholars above.

XI. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that students should be part and parcel of curriculum design and development in order to ensure courses that resonate with them, as well as to improve the quality of such courses. Lack of student's involvement has led to disengagement between learners and educators, resulting in students feeling alienated on issues that concern them.

It is high time that CHE, which the accreditation body should consider student input as one of the determining factor for the accreditation of courses, as they are key recipients of the education, and their experiences are true reflection of what really transpires within different institutions, as institutions turn to mask their deficiencies.

XII. CONCLUSION

It is evident that students input in accreditation of courses in tertiary institutions have no direct impact on the final outcome and accreditation of courses. In as much as the CHE requests interviews with students and alumni, there are a number of determining factors while students are just a small fraction of what is required for the courses to be accredited. Institutions of higher learning still work on the assumption that learners are passive therefore will not have meaningful

contribution in curriculum development, an assumption which remains a barrier in terms of delivering relevant content suitable for the demands on the learners and the industry. Having neglected students' involvement, this has built a great wall in forming teacher/learner relationship that is crucial for delivery in schools.

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