Quality Management Initiatives in Higher Education Institutions of SADC Countries

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The Southern Africa Development Conference (SADC) regional protocol on education has been ratified by all the member countries. The protocol emphasizes the importance of harmonizing the regional education systems and maintaining acceptable standards at all educational levels. This harmonization cannot take place smoothly until each education system takes stock of its own activities. This calls for the implementation of quality management in these institutions of higher learning. In addition, stakeholders in higher education have called for the accountability of the institutions as well as the cost-effectiveness of the programmes offered by these institutions while ensuring quality of delivery of education. Universities and other institutions of higher learning in the region are, therefore, setting up some mechanisms for the implementation of 'quality management'. 'Quality auditing' is the first step that has been suggested before the full implementation of quality management for the maintenance of high standards. Quality auditing will involve self-evaluation at institutional, faculty and departmental levels with respect to the mission, goals, objectives and activities of the institution. The institutions of higher education in the SADC region have the potential to provide more and better training, utilizing their tools and experiences. The challenge is to play a more active role and aim to gain leadership in their own field of expertise. The SADC region's Vice Chancellors had an opportunity in March 2003, of meeting in Mauritius where they approved, in principle, the setting up of mechanisms for implementing quality management within the SADC institutions of higher learning. A regional workshop was to spearhead this initiative in September 2003.

Introduction

The SADC Regional protocol on education has been ratified by all the member countries. The protocol emphasizes the importance of harmonizing the regional education systems and maintaining acceptable standards at all educational levels. This harmonization cannot take place smoothly until each education system takes stock of its own activities. It is being realized that education is currently being viewed as a commodity much needed by each member state to support its developmental activities (Koorts, 2001). The issue of quality management at the tertiary educational level is now under constant discussion, often being driven by government pressure to do more, with fewer resources, in addition to the calls from other stakeholders including parents and employers. A number of stakeholders call for increasing accountability and democracy within the tertiary education systems (Brennan and Shah 2000). Tertiary education institutions are also being called upon to adapt to globalization, internationalization, as well as market forces.

The World Bank (2000) admits in a recent publication that indeed "there is a perception that the Bank has not been fully responsive to the growing demand by clients for tertiary education interventions and that, especially in the poorest countries, lending for the sub-sector has not matched the importance of tertiary education systems for economic and social development". This makes it possible to address development proposals now to the World Bank and other organizations and governments that focus on higher education and, with a bit of luck, have them even regarded as relevant to Agenda 21 principles. These would contribute to the improvement of political, social, economic and ecological structures in one global world. Accompanying this open goal, there are a large number of issues that have been identified as priorities to create a better world particularly for the people who are marginalized, discriminated, suffering from abject poverty and without access to even a minimum quality of living. Those primary issues include human rights, democracy, rule of law, participation of the civil society, equity between women and men, institutional stability, economic growth for the benefit of all people, elimination of discriminating social structures, access to quality public health, education, social security systems, as well as environmental protection.

There is hardly any field of development without the transfer of knowledge that has not been generated in the industrialized countries. In most cases, knowledge seems to have been generated by the universities and relevant research institutions. This, alone, calls for a much stronger involvement of tertiary education in the framework of development cooperation. This is why tertiary education particularly in the developing countries has such an important and responsible role to play and why it should be supported and involved as a key player for sustainable development. It is also important that these tertiary institutions implement quality management if stakeholders' expectations are going to be met fully.

Quality Management responsibility includes responsibility for a clearly articulated quality policy, including mission statement, objectives and a commitment to standards in a recorded statement. The statements need to be published throughout the institution and be seen to-be supported by management. All employees and students of the institution should be able to understand the mission statement as well as the objectives and the commitment required by them. Management is responsible for ensuring that new employees are trained and therefore a training policy should also be in place (Evans 1999).

Quality Management also ensures that there is a clearly understood and effective Structure of Responsibility and Authority to achieve the policy objectives. Personnel having responsibility and authority to control the key elements in the Quality Management System and process should be identified and their job requirements should be defined (Evans 1999).

Verification and the resources and personnel needed to achieve this are another responsibility of quality management. Verification is a systematic inspection, checking and testing of graduates or outputs of all departments to ensure that they are meeting standards and the testing of the satisfaction of students and employers with these training programmes and services. Quality management, therefore, ensures that there are quality control procedures or verification procedures for all programmes and services and that these are conducted by persons other than those who directly produce or provide i.e. teachers and administrators (Evans 1999). Quality Management is also responsible for the review of the quality system including regular reviews of documented policies and procedures. Johnes. & Taylor (1990) developed a list of what the SADC institutions of higher education might wish to consider carefully in establishing Quality Management.

Quality Management in Higher Education in SADC Countries

Currently a number of institutions of higher learning outside SADC have adopted quality management practices in order for the institutions to be accountable to the students, employers, parents, funding institutions and other stakeholders. For all such institutions, "Quality Management" is about ensuring that standards are specified and met consistently for the graduates, product or a service.

The SADC Region is experiencing:
- ♦ a growing number of regional undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
- ♦ varying entry qualifications into mainly the postgraduate programmes
- ♦ a call for the standardization of qualifications at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels
- ♦ a demand for most national programmes to receive accreditation.

The possibility of a quality management system for South African Universities was first mooted in 1993 at a meeting of the Education Committee of the Committee of University Principals, who, in 1996, set up the first Quality Promotion Unit (QPU). The prime purpose of QPU was to assist universities in establishing internal quality assurance systems by means of institutional self-evaluation, with the aim of promoting Quality Improvement (Griesel et al 2002). South Africa passed a Higher Education Act in 1997and this led to the establishment, in 1998, of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to oversee the establishment of a quality assurance system through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (CHE 2003). Thus South Africa, together with Lesotho Namibia and to a certain extent Botswana are the only SADC countries that have set up qualification authorities to monitor and implement quality assurance and therefore management. The remaining ten SADC countries do not have qualification authority mechanisms in place.

A number of the SADC Vice Chancellors are recommending that the South African initiative be studied and that the applicable sections of the South African Initiative be adopted in a new "Regional Initiative" for the SADC Region. The following are the main reasons for the recommendation:

- it will serve as a catalyst for institutions of higher learning to engage themselves in and see quality management as an important undertaking that must be ensured at all times.

- adoption of quality management systems will provide tertiary institutions with an opportunity to assure the public, governments and the donor community that the institutions of higher learning are doing well and may thus attract more support for the much needed resources in support of the various programmes.

- harmonization of quality management systems across the region will ensure that weaker institutions are assisted to improve their quality and thus enhance student and staff exchange among the institutions.

It should be appreciated that all the SADC Universities will claim to have quality management systems in place. Thus the following information will normally be cited: system of external examiners; course validations; professional commitment; peer reviews and formal examinations as aspects of quality assurance for University teaching and learning. The presence of these quality measurement units in each of the SADC universities needs to be acknowledged and these should form the basis for further quality management development.

Through the current regional initiative, the SADC Universities will be expected to gauge themselves against certain characteristics of quality management. A few examples of the kind of information needed are as follows:

- specifications of standards for whatever is conceived as the training (product) or service.
- identification of critical functions and procedures that will be necessary to achieve these standards.
- constant recourse to the customer (e.g. student or employer) to set and monitor the accomplishment of standards.
- documented clarity with regard to both the standards to be achieved and the procedures that must be followed to achieve these standards
- a cybernetic approach to standards and procedure setting, which involves monitoring that standards are being met and procedures followed, and taking action to remedy or rectify shortfalls coupled with a regular review of the appropriateness of standards and procedures.
- the total involvement of all personnel and commitment to development and training.

It is equally important for the Teacher Training Institutions within each of the SADC countries also implement quality management since the students/products from these institutions teach the students that form the next university recruits.

Quality Management in Relation to Regional and National Development Goals

The Universities in the SADC Region have the potential to provide more and better training utilizing their tools and experiences. The challenge is to play a more active role and aim to gain leadership in their fields of expertise. This sounds far from reality under the given poor quality situation of many faculties where most undergraduate students cannot even afford a textbook and only "those students, who regurgitate a credible portion of their notes from memory achieve exam success" (World Bank 2000). Independent and flexible thinking and learning by problem solving is often not the standard in under- and even post-graduate classes of today. It is obvious that improvement of the quality of teaching and research, including regular curriculum reviews deserve high priority. Specifically a transparent process of evaluation of teaching quality should be implemented as a standard measure. Universities must realize that they are now operating in a competitive postgraduate education market in the region, which is under pressure from institutions overseas.

Established programmes also need to be reviewed at regular intervals and a 'quality label' will require periodic renewal.

Today, the SADC region offers opportunities for intensified networking, which would allow the more efficient use of specific resources, i.e. the knowledge and experiences of a certain group or department or specific equipment. A decentralized approach could result in synergistic effects, contribute to a higher efficiency of locally available resources and may build capacity throughout the

region. Capacity building in higher education takes a very long time of from 15 years or more, which is usually beyond the conventional duration of a development project of six to nine years.

Networking and communication could be improved through the effective use of Internet. The universities could strengthen their linkages within and outside the region with other academic and non-academic institutions through offering jointly tailored courses for specific target groups or demand oriented research programmes. The development of new topics and the use of multimedia in teaching and research should be envisaged to support and improve the teaching situation of residential and non-residential students. In future, training programmes might be required to incorporate production of information and communication technology (ICT) based modules aiming at reaching new target groups and supporting the paradigm change from teachers' oriented to students' centered learning.

A higher degree of integration into various development programmes within the education sector could benefit the universities and their partners. National and regional postgraduate programmes are challenged to integrate and adjust their training and research agenda towards developmental issues. A shift from on-station conducted research to problem-oriented on-field, practitioner oriented or participatory community based projects, are being encouraged.

Universities could achieve impact on the development of various sectors through pursuing various strategic options:

- In the education sector through training of teachers and managers in various education units, reform of the educational sector through revision of curricula and development of relevant outreach and distance learning programmes.

- Focus on poverty reduction programmes through providing access to and transfer of knowledge on technical, economical and political methodologies relevant to development and commodity production. This requires an integration of the institution itself into development programmes within and across the economic sector.

- Utilisation and conservation of natural, crop plant and farm animal genetic resources through development of concepts, management and action programmes. Collaboration with the CGIAR system would ensure state-of-the-art application of methodologies.

The Formation of the Higher Education Quality Management Initiative of Southern Africa

This initiative was formulated in December 2002 when a group of Vice Chancellors or their representatives met in Malawi. The formation of the initiative was discussed and it was felt that the purpose of the Initiative was **"To enhance the ability of SADC institutions in higher education to play a leading role in the development of the SADC countries by addressing the most pertinent and current issues while maintaining accountability to all stakeholders".**

In order to implement the activities associated with quality management a Task Force was formed whose purpose was to **"sensitize leaders: Vice Chancellors and Rectors of the SADC institutions of higher learning to be informed and to broaden the stakeholders base by holding a workshop of SADC institutions".**

A working paper on the initiative was developed and was presented to and circulated among the SADC vice Chancellors and Rectors at an Association of African Universities Conference in Mauritius in March 2003. The Vice Chancellors and Rectors approved the formation of the Initiative and encouraged the Task Force to continue its activities and where possible co-opt other relevant personnel.

The stakeholders' workshop was held in Johannesburg in September 2003. At that workshop, key areas of collaboration in quality management were identified and prioritized into immediate, short-term and long-term categories. In addition, a way forward and the implementation strategy for the initiative, was suggested.

Regional Quality Management Initiative Strategies and Way Forward

During the stakeholder workshop it was noted that, among the 14 SADC countries, only South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho and Botswana had developed some quality management structures that were in place. It was also noted that there was no SADC Qualifications Framework from which individual SADC member countries could develop their own structures. If only such a structure were available, the problems of qualifications recognition and comparability would not have arisen.

The key focus area identified by stakeholders at the workshop in Johannesburg for the Quality Management Initiative included the following:

- ♦ Sharing of knowledge and information among the institutions of higher education and stakeholders
- ♦ Capacity building in Quality Management in the institutions of higher education

- ♦ Setting-up Quality Management units in the institutions of higher education
- ♦ The fostering of full ownership of Quality Management by all members within each institution of higher education.
- ♦ Setting-up benchmark in Quality Management.
- ♦ Setting-up a Regional Qualification Framework.
- ♦ Setting-up Regional and National Accreditation Units.
- ♦ Establishment of a Regional Quality Management Association.

The list above was for the priority items identified by the stakeholders. There were other areas that were identified but were nor listed as priority areas and these will have to be assessed again at a later stage.

To implement all the above activities, SADC institutions of higher education through/and the Task Force will need to find possible collaborators that will provide technical support. The initiative will also require some financial backing both for running the Task Force activities as well as for the implementation of some of the priority areas. There is the need to coordinate and obtain best practices from those already experienced in quality management. Effective regional communication channels also need to be developed for the dissemination of all available information on quality management.

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