

Quality Assurance of University Education in Alberta and Kenya: Policies and Practices

James Alan Oloo¹

Faculty of Education University of Regina 3737 Wascana Parkway Regina, SK S4S 0A2 Canada
Email: oloo200j@uregina.ca, Phone: 306.653.0249

Frederick O. Ogola, (Ph.D)²

Faculty of Education Egerton University Kenya

Abstract

Since the introduction of degree granting institutions, Alberta and Kenya have persistently made efforts to manage and improve the quality of university education. While contexts, stakeholders, and quality assurance regimes have changed over time, debate on academic quality in both jurisdictions has continued bringing to the fore disagreements about the exact meaning of the phrase. However, many observers appreciate the importance of quality assurance and enhancement of degree programming. In this paper, we review policies and practices in quality assurance of degree education in the Canadian Province of Alberta and Kenya and the roles of Campus Alberta Quality Council and the Kenya Commission for Higher Education in assuring and enhancing quality of higher education in the two jurisdictions. Possible lessons for Kenya and other developing countries are presented.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, Alberta, Canada, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

In both Alberta and Kenya, postsecondary participation rates have been growing steadily for years (Oloo, 2010). While recognizing the social and economic benefits of investing in higher education, Snowdon (2010) noted that, “government commitment to quality higher education must be strengthened” (p. 2). The rapid expansion and the increased number of higher education institutions creates a necessity to address the question of quality of university education and whether it should be sacrificed for quantity (Law, 2010; Oloo, 2010). Welle-Strand (2000) asserted that for a country to remain relevant in today’s competitive knowledge economy, quality and reputation of its higher education institutions and programs must be visibly eminent and prioritised.

¹ James Alan Oloo is a PhD (Educational Administration) student at the Faculty of Education, University of Regina. He previously worked as a policy analyst at the Campus Alberta Quality Council, Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

² Dr. Frederick O. Ogola is a professor at the Faculty of Education, Egerton University, Kenya

In recent years, university education in Alberta and Kenya has undergone fundamental reforms. A primary aspect of the education reforms in the two jurisdictions is the “emphasis on the pursuit of educational quality” (Law, 2010, p. 65). Two schools of thought have dominated the debate with one arguing for institutional aspects of quality, that is, the search for excellence (Beno, 2004; Trow, 1996), while the other emphasizes student aspects of quality, that is, learning outcomes (Kaltiliute & Neveravskas, 2009; Moodie, 2008). Institutional aspects of quality may involve its validation of external quality assurance agencies such as Campus Alberta Quality Council and Kenya Commission for Higher Education. While others may perceive this as government intrusion in institutional autonomy, others (for example Bilings, 2004; Kells, 1995) posit that external validation of institutional quality assurance may enhance public accountability and planning in the higher education sector. Proponents of student-focused aspects of quality, like Katiliute and Neverauskas (2009), have emphasized that quality teaching leads to quality learning. Thus, while there are aspects where the two schools do not agree, such as with respect of institutional autonomy, which is highly valued by universities (Katiliute & Neverauskas, 2009), both the underscore quality improvement in meeting individual and social aspects of higher education. In this study, we view both arguments as complementary rather than competing and suggest them as equally useful in improving the quality of university education.

Education quality in institutions of higher learning has persistently been a concern in Alberta (Bond & Patton, 2007) and Kenya (Obamba, 2009; Oketch, 2004). Tsui and Sum (2002) averred that quality of university education changes with time, place, contexts, and stakeholders’ needs, and therefore effective quality assurance and enhancement hinged upon a better understanding of the purposes, processes, and expected outcomes of higher education. In business management, indicators of quality, such as those relating to efficiency and effectiveness are extant and ubiquitous. Higher education quality assurance mechanisms and performance indicators have largely borrowed from their business counterparts (Gudo, Oanda & Olel, 2011).

Despite the reforms in university education, debate about academic quality assurance has often evoked emotive disputations about the meaning of the phrase. For example, Dill (2003) argued that quality in the academia is “amorphous, non-measurable, [and] too ambiguous” to be regulated. Beaton (1999) viewed arguments on quality to be rhetoric, devoid of substance and nebulous. Pounder (1999) also found academic quality to be ambiguous. Because of the difficulty in defining quality, the measurement of quality has proven to be equally contentious. In spite of the contentions, Harvey and Green (1993) proffered five broad definitions of quality. According to Harvey and Green (1993) quality in higher education is; a) exceptional, b) perfection or consistency, c) fitness for purpose, that is, quality is based on the intended outcomes; d) value for money; and e) transformation.

Clark (1983) suggested two aspects of quality in higher education, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic quality focuses on “knowledge creating processes and student learning” (p. 3) while extrinsic quality focuses on the society’s demands and expectations of the higher education system. Van Vught (1997) defined intrinsic qualities of higher education as “the basis values and ideals which form the very heart of higher education: the unfettered search for truth and the

disinterested pursuit of knowledge” (p. 81). Van Vught further defined extrinsic qualities of higher education as the “capacities of higher education to respond to the changing needs of the societies of which they are a part” (p. 80). Giertz (2001), building on Clark’s (1983) and Van Vught’s (1997) work, proposed a third category of quality, ‘politically correct quality’ (p. 20) to assess the role of the government authorities with respect to quality in higher education. The three aspects of higher education quality are related to at least three functions of higher education, namely, “to create knowledge and develop the minds of students, to serve the economy, and to further the political agenda” (Giertz, 2001, p. 2). At least three social forces, namely, academic community, the market, and the state (Clark, 1983), generally influence these. Giertz (2001, p. 4) surmised that the intrinsic, extrinsic and politically correct quality, represent different approaches to “what could be meant by quality” in higher education. As Giertz concluded, while the three approaches differ in scope and approach, they are not mutually exclusive. The same applies to learning outcomes and institutional aspects of quality assurance. In a bid to avoid the elusive and subjective concept of quality (Dill, 2003; Law, 2010), many organizations have embraced quality assurance as a safer route insuring the attainment of organizational goals (Doherty, 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Quality of university education can be viewed through various lenses including micro or program delivery level and macro or university-level initiatives (Jones, 2003). For example, in Alberta the Ministry of Advanced Education approves new degree programs while in Kenya this is the responsibility of the University Senate and the Kenya Commission for Higher Education. In some instances, professional bodies also play an important role in the approval of programs. Macro or university –level focus includes cases where new universities are licensed after meeting specific program and university-wide quality evaluations (Jones, 2003). Other lenses include degree quality assurance as a check-off list or the view of quality enhancement as an ongoing process, while others focus on the search for excellence, that is, institutional aspects of quality, versus learning outcomes (Moodie, 2008; Trow, 2004).

This study uses an approach presented by Jones (2003) that combines various aspects of these lenses and argues that what is needed is program level quality assurance that is reflected in the macro-level with various micro-level program delivery being empowered and having resources and freedom yet linked to the university-wide system of quality assurance and enhancement. This approach is important because Alberta and Kenya do not use identical quality assurance mechanisms and there are variations even within the jurisdictions themselves. In Kenya for example, the Commission for Higher Education employs two main mechanisms in its work: a standards-based approach that reviews the degree to which institutional process conforms to predetermined standards, and fitness-for-purpose that explores adherence to the mission and jurisdictional generally accepted standards of quality and academic excellence (Lenga, 2009). As well, some universities, such as those in Australia, normally undertake to have the degree programs they offer offshore to be of comparable quality to those offered in the home

university (Kristoffersen & Woodhouse, 2005). Therefore, where such programs are delivered in Kenya, it is expected that they meet accreditation requirements by both Australian quality assurance agencies and the Kenya Commission for Higher Education. The same is the case with Alberta's University of Calgary campus in Qatar whose degree programs are accredited by Campus Alberta Quality Council and Qatari higher education quality assurance authorities.

As earlier mentioned, there is a lack of consensus as to what constitutes requirements for quality. For some institutions, it could be appearing in the list of top 100 universities in the world. For others it may be the number of partnerships signed or amount of research funding received from the private sector. There is however, one issue on which the divide with respect to the definition of quality is perhaps not too broad. Academic quality assurance, which involves planned and systematic actions (Borahan & Ziarati, 2002), is an on-going process (Leyton-Brown, 2004) which degree granting institutions guarantee maintenance and enhancement of quality educational standards, both in the process and learning outcomes (Standa 2007).

Quality assurance processes in higher education are based on three general principles namely, institutional self-appraisal, peer experts who make a site visit and prepare a report, the report and institutional response to the report together with criteria set by quality assurance agencies generally inform decision on evaluation process (Leyton-Brown, 2004). A fourth principle is regulation through agencies such as Campus Alberta Quality Council in Alberta and the Commission for Higher Education in Kenya. The latter, as will be seen later, assures quality in private but not public universities in Kenya. The regulator ought to possess a judicious mix of relevant technical expertise, and a detached external stakeholder perspective (Kristoffersen & Woodhouse, 2005).

There is no consensus on the value of external quality assurance processes on higher education. Writing about external quality assurance in Europe, Neave (1991) asserted that external quality assurance frameworks serve as a tool for resource allocation or resource withdrawal. Kells (1995) identified potential advantages of external quality assurance as including quality improvement, public assurance, and resource allocation. Billing (2004) summarized the purposes of external quality assurance as quality improvement; public accountability; accreditation; and higher education sector planning. Trow (1994) posited that academic quality assurance processes, especially when controlled by governments and other external agencies, do not necessarily result in better quality education. Efforts by government agencies "to assess the quality of university work lead to its decline as more and more energy is spent on bureaucratic reports and as universities begin to adapt to the simplifying tendencies of the quantification of outputs" (p. 20). However, Trow seems to over-generalize an issue that is neither simple nor straightforward. Indeed, there is no evidence in Alberta or Kenya to support Trow's position that quality of degree programs may have declined in the period after 1985 and 2004 when the Commission for Higher Education and Campus Alberta Quality Council were established in Kenya and Alberta respectively. On the contrary, Alberta's University of Calgary has since established a campus in Doha, Qatar and according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2008 (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2008), University of Alberta ranked

97 in the top 200 universities in the world in 2007 and 74 in 2008 while the University of Calgary moved from 166 to 170 during the same period. Perhaps building on Trow's argument, Gosling and D'Andrea (2001) proposed a quality development approach to higher education that integrates "enhancement of learning and teaching with the quality and standards monitoring processes in the university" (p. 11) in three core areas: academic development, learning development, and quality development. In other words, Gosling and D'Andrea called for a degree quality development process that produces quality graduates.

While there is no checklist for what constitutes effective quality assurance agencies, researchers and practitioners have suggested common elements in effective agencies. Smout and Stephenson (2002) identified five pre-requisites for effective quality assurance agencies: adequate financial resources, strong human resource capacity, a clear vision and the political will to make it work, support from the higher education sector, and the ability within the higher education institutions to make quality assurance work. Alberta and Kenya have, in various degrees, continued to meet these prerequisites. Both allocate financial resources to CAQC and CHE respectively and support stronger human resources capacity for their higher education quality assurance process.

Both CAQC and CHE have clear visions to succeed in their roles of quality assurance and enhancement. CAQC "conducts periodic evaluations of approved degree programs to ensure that quality standards continue to be met and is committed to ensuring the national and international recognition of Alberta's degrees" (CAQC 2010) while CHE's vision is "to be a world-class body for the advancement and quality assurance of higher education" (CHE, 2008). Both agencies, being creations of their respective legislative bodies, enjoy reasonable political good will.

CAQC conducts regular meetings with representatives of Alberta universities. Indeed, CAQC's documents such as the Roles and mandates policy framework and the Toolkit for off-site and cross-border delivery of programs (CAQC, 2010), were prepared by working groups comprised of CAQC and representatives of the universities. In Kenya, CHE plays an important legitimization role given the increased growth in the number of unregistered postsecondary institutions (Nganga, 2010). Further, the fact that the work of CHE is publicly available on its website is good for accountability reasons and is likely to enhance support among stakeholders.

While emphasizing the difference between academic quality and quality assurance processes and outcomes, Moodie (2008) posited that monitoring in academic quality should be of standards directly and not of processes which may or may not result in high quality. He suggested that quality assurance agencies should take a risk management approach rather than seeking to apply the same level of scrutiny to all institutions and all areas. That is, CAQC and CHE should scrutinize most intensively institutions and areas that are at greatest risk of a lapse of standards and it should spend far less effort monitoring institutions and areas that have a low risk of poor standards.

METHODOLOGY

Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of conditions, and are an important tool in understanding of complex issues that could add value to what is already known through prior research (Yin, 1984). Yin defined case study research method as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). In this study, the ‘real-life’ context refers to the procedures and practices of higher education quality assurance in Alberta and Kenya as described on their websites and policy documents. Yin argued that while using case studies as a research tool is one of the most challenging of all social science endeavours, in general, it is the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. Yin posited that case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and key characteristics of real life events.

This study explores the context of quality in degree education in Alberta and Kenya. The two jurisdictions were chosen because the authors are natives of Kenya and one of the authors previously worked as a policy analyst at the Campus Alberta Quality Council in Edmonton, Alberta. Primary sources for the descriptive aspects of this study were websites for Campus Alberta Quality Council (www.caqc.gov.ab.ca) and Kenya Commission for Higher Education (www.che.or.ke).

Quality assurance of higher education in Alberta

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility and there is no federal ministry of education. In the absence of a national quality assurance policy for higher education and the lack of a formal national accreditation system, membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) serves as an assurance of an institution’s education (Queen’s University Senate Committee on Academic Development, 2004). As well as having their own internal quality assurance policies and processes, members of AUCC are committed to AUCC principles of institutional quality assurance. These principles include provision of responsive, “high quality education that is competitive with that offered anywhere else in the world and the provision of complete and reliable information about the quality of their educational programs to maintain public confidence, [and] support mobility of graduates” (AUCC, 2008, p. 1).

Established in 2004 by an Act of legislature, Campus Alberta Quality Council advises the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology on applications to offer new degree programs in Alberta. CAQC also offers guidelines on quality assurance to Alberta universities offering degree programming outside Alberta. Approval to offer degree programs in Alberta is a two-stage review process. The initial review, known as the coordination review, considers the need for the program and its fits with degree programs currently offered in Alberta. During the review process, the ministry may require the institution to submit a self-evaluation report. The self-study provides evidence of the institution’s academic and strategic planning, governance and

resources, as well as its analysis of any shortfalls and plans for improvement (Bond & Patton, 2007).

The second stage, known as the quality review, is done by CAQC. When evaluating the proposal, CAQC may decide whether to conduct a full or an expedited review. A full review includes an organizational review, to determine if the institution is capable of implementing and sustaining the proposed degree program, and a program review to determine whether the quality of the proposed degree program meets CAQC's standards.

Full review usually applies to institutions that are proposing to offer a degree program for the first time. A team from CAQC team first conducts a site visit to the institution, and prepares a report for CAQC that the institution is required to respond. CAQC considers the team report and the institution's response and if successful, the application moves to the program review stage. After program review, CAQC makes a recommendation to the Minister on whether or not to approve the application. For an expedited review, CAQC only evaluate the quality of the program. Expedited review usually applies to 'mature' institutions like the Universities of Alberta and Calgary.

In addition to the institutional internal quality assurance processes and external guidelines such as those set by CAQC, some degree programs are subject to accreditation by professional regulatory organizations, such as Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board, Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, and the Canadian Architectural Certification Board. The accreditation bodies participate in the establishment and review of postsecondary programs and other professional issues governing students' preparations for professional practice (AUCC, 2007; Bond & Patton, 2007). This form of review aims at meeting and or exceeding the stated standards and leads to professional accreditation of specific programs.

Some programs offered by Alberta institutions are also accredited by American accreditation agencies. These include University of Calgary's Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program that is accredited by the American Veterinary Medicine Association, and the University of Alberta School of Business and the University of Calgary Haskayne School of Business, both accredited by the American-based Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Whether or not the accrediting agency is based in Canada, meeting or exceeding the requirements of these agencies is an affirmation of quality (Bond & Patton, 2007). However, while CAQC recognizes the existence of such accreditations, its decisions are not subservient to those by other agencies (CAQC, 2007).

Challenges to academic quality assurance in Alberta

Alberta permits 'non-resident' institutions, such as the University of Northern British Columbia and University of Phoenix, to offer degree programs in the province. Because Alberta and most Canadian Provinces have traditionally focused on resident institutions as opposed to commercial transnational universities (Leyton-Brown, 2004), observers, such as Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), worry that this gap could lead to a proliferation of degree mills (CMEC, 2007). Indeed, in 2007, the governments of China, India, and Korea advised their

students to be cautious of private institutions in Canada following reports that British Columbia Minister of Advanced Education was investigating private for-profit institutions for granting university degrees in the province without authorization (Sen, 2007).

Although there is need for a coherent national process for ensuring quality of higher education programs in Canada, how this could be attained within the context of exclusive provincial/territorial jurisdiction over education is a longstanding policy paradox. In 2007, provincial ministers responsible for higher education in Canada under the umbrella CMEC took a step towards a Canada-wide policy for quality assurance of degree education in Canada. The proposals endorsed by CMEC aim to “provide assurance ... at home and abroad that ... programs and ... institutions of higher learning meet appropriate standards” (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2007, p. 1). However, these proposals were non-binding and nothing has been done with respect to national quality assurance of degree programs in Canada since then.

Despite the importance of AUCC membership as attestation for institutional and program quality, there is a potential shortcoming in overreliance on AUCC given that AUCC has no re-accreditation requirement (Marshall, 2004). Thus, once an institution becomes a member of AUCC, it remains a member with no “further assessment of degree-granting capability” (p. 92). In the coming years, the presence of transnational private-for profit institutions in Alberta is likely to increase judging by the fact that between 2009 and 2010, Alberta Minister of Advanced Education approved four new graduate degree programs to be offered in Alberta by City University of Seattle, Gonzaga University, and University of Portland (CAQC, 2010). Because private-for profit universities are currently excluded from AUCC membership, one would expect that students will be made aware of the AUCC institutional membership and opportunities and challenges that this is likely to present. In this section, we presented issues and processes of academic quality assurance processes in Alberta. In the next section, we explore quality assurance in the Kenya higher education sector.

Higher education quality assurance in Kenya

Kenya has eight public and seventeen private universities. A number of foreign institutions including Edith Cowan University (Australia), Technicon Southern Africa University (South Africa), and the University of Sunderland (Great Britain) also their degree programs, usually in partnerships with local institutions. About 20 percent of the 150,000 university students attend private universities. The annual university enrolment in Kenya accounts for less than 10 percent of the high school graduates (Oloo, 2010). Because of high demand, Kenyan public universities are often stretched beyond what their physical facilities can accommodate (Gudo, Oanda, & Olel, 2011).

Quality assurance in Kenyan universities is conducted under two legal provisions; public universities are established under their respective acts of parliament that gives them autonomy in governance and quality assurance, while the Commission of Higher Education oversees program and institutional level quality in private universities. Academic quality assurance for private

universities takes the form of program and institutional accreditation, and re-audits based on CHE's standards and guidelines. Public universities in Kenya are self-regulating in matters of quality assurance and enhancement. Although CHE expects public universities to take into consideration the CHE standards and guidelines in their institutional quality assurance processes (Lenga, 2010), there is no mechanism in place to ensure that this occurs. The question worth asking is whether adopting quality assurance regimes, as is the case in Kenya, results in efficient institutions that effectively produce competent graduates. There is no consensus on the verdict (see Alusa, 2011; Ahenda, 2010; Materu, 2009).

Materu (2009) attributed the growing popularity of formal quality assurance agencies in Africa to the emergence of private postsecondary institutions and the need to regulate their operations. He went on to posit that higher education quality assurance agencies in Africa seem to emphasize regulation instead of assuring quality and improvement. Similarly, Altbach and Davis (1999) asserted that expansion of degree programming has led to increased demands for accountability, reconsideration of the role of higher education in individual and community development, and the impact of globalization and new technologies.

The fact that CHE has no jurisdiction over public universities does not mean that quality is a new issue at the public universities. Rather, there are established, often semi-formal quality assurance systems at the universities, usually at the departmental or faculty level (Kidombo, 2007) such as involvement of external examiners in thesis defence. However, outcomes are rarely publicised or fed back into the university-wide system of quality assurance and therefore have little effect on quality improvement (Fourie & Alt, 2000).

Public universities in Kenya may choose to enter into partnership agreements with non-degree granting private or public colleges to deliver their degree programs (Commission for Higher Education, 2006). This policy is double-edged. While it empowers public universities to be responsive to demand for degree programming and is less bureaucratic, public institutions are expected to 'accredit' the colleges they partner with to deliver their programs. However, public universities have been accused of putting more emphasis on increased enrolment to raise money from tuition than on quality of their degree programs (Oketch, 2004).

Challenges and possible future development

Tsui and Sum (2002), in their research on higher education quality assurance in Hong Kong, identified four main purposes of academic quality assurance; to ensure and develop quality, to detect good and bad quality, to put in place a strong quality culture, and as a basis for self-assessment and change. In their own ways, CAQC and CHE play fundamental roles in achieving these goals in Alberta and Kenya respectively. A challenge facing CAQC and CHE is striking a good balance in their roles as a tool for sanctioning and rewarding, conducting evaluation processes that presuppose interpretations and judgments, and operating systems that require equal and fair treatment of institutions.

Rapid expansion of university education in Kenya in the past three decades continues to present a major challenge to quality of degree programming. In 1960s, Kenya had one university

with a total enrolment of about 500 students (Obamba, 2009). Today, about 150,000 students write Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (equivalent of Grade 12 exams in Alberta) annually. Of these, about 20,000 or 13 percent join public universities while 6,000 or four percent pursue degree education in private universities. About 60,000 or forty percent enrol in non-degree postsecondary institutions in the country. Data is not available about those who seek degree education abroad. Between 1990 and 2000, about 180,000 of the students who attained the minimum entry requirements for baccalaureate programs missed admission to public universities due mainly to lack of capacity (Gathuthi, 2010; Oketch, 2004).

However, the correlation between enrolment and funding has not been positive. Between 1990 and 2000, for example, public spending on education averaged 20 per cent of total public expenditure in Kenya, a level that is relatively high if compared to other developing countries with similar socioeconomic characteristics (Obamba, 2009). The proportion of the consolidated education budget allocated to higher education declined from 20 percent to 14 percent between 1990 and 1994. This funding level declined further to 13 percent in the 2005-2006 financial year and has continued to decline in recent years (Obamba, 2009). Public universities have responded to the growing demand for higher education and declining government funding by offering full fee-paying programs, what Wangenge-Ouma (2008, p. 457) referred to as the “de facto market source of revenue for Kenya’s public universities.” Wangenge-Ouma asserted that focusing on full fee-paying programs has compromised quality of degree programs in Kenyan public universities. However, after building a strong case why Kenya should be wary of the full-fee paying programs on degree quality, Wangenge-Ouma did not present convincing evidence to support his assertion that degree quality has been compromised.

Because public universities are not explicitly required by CHE or Kenya’s Ministry of Higher Education to undergo external reviews, in an era when universities face funding cuts, increasing demand for their programs, and a lax quality monitoring system, they may be tempted to sacrifice quality at the altar of increased financial inflow. It is therefore important that public funding to postsecondary institutions in Kenya be linked to institutional commitments to quality assurance and enhancement of their degree programs.

Materu (2009) identified human resource capacity as the most pressing challenge to quality assurance agencies in most African countries. This, he posited, manifests itself in two ways: “insufficient numbers of adequately trained and credible professional staff to manage quality assurance processes with integrity and consistency ... and inadequate numbers of academic staff in higher educational institutions with knowledge and experience in conducting self-evaluations and peer reviews” (p. xviii). With aging population in most developed countries, it is possible that Alberta academic quality assurance sector may also experience human resource challenges in the coming years.

CAQC and CHE continuously maintain documentation and processes that guide academic quality assurance and enhancement in their respective jurisdictions. However, there is a potential risk of paying less attention to whether institutions are teaching and assessing their students at appropriate levels as the agencies’ processes and guidelines tend to emphasize on whether

institutions have established and documented in great detail processes which may or may not enhance teaching and student assessment (Moodie, 2008). As Law (2010, p. 72) put it, higher education systems “tend to favour the institutional aspects rather than the student aspects of the quality issues,” as well as put more emphasis on the “accountability-led view rather than the improvement-led view of quality assurance.”

Arguing that there is no silver bullet in quality of postsecondary education, Finnie and Usher (2005) posited that there are “no simple measures we can point to and say ‘yes, there is quality, let’s have some more of it’” (p. 3). Finnie and Usher proposed a conceptual model for measuring quality that involves defining educational experiences in terms of inputs (resources) and post-graduation outcomes (such as employment); identifying what constitutes a student’s education (class size, professor contact, resources available); assessment of learning outputs (acquired skills, ability to work independently or in teams), and how students do after graduation. Finnie and Usher surmised that “higher quality experiences are those that result in superior learning outputs (taking into account where the student began), and better final outcomes” (p. 2).

Lessons for Kenya and other developing countries

While public universities in Kenya enjoy autonomy with respect to entering in to partnerships, starting new programs, and ensuring quality of their programs, there should be some form of accountability and transparency in their policies on quality assurance after all they get public funding. This could be by way of an external oversight by peers or organization such as CHE. External review promotes institutional quality improvement by giving a third party feedback to the institution as well as enhancing and legitimizing internal quality management (CAQC, 2010). There are vast differences among universities with respect to quality and resources. In Kenya, quality assurance mechanisms have not been uniformly implemented in the universities. No external regulatory body exists for public universities while private universities have different stages with some operating under an interim charter while others have a full charter.

As stated above, in both Alberta and Kenya, institutional self-appraisal is a key aspect of quality assurance and enhancement. However, unlike in Alberta where CAQC provides external evaluation of institutions and programs, in Kenya, public universities have no such a body. While self-assessment can be variable in its quality and effectiveness (Leyton-Brown, 2004), it is the foundation of well-managed and successful institutions (Materu, 2009) and is likely to lead to quality enhancement of degree programming and make the “reports of external reviewers more useful to that purpose” (Leyton-Brown, 2004, p. 11). Trow (1996, p. 30) posited that effective quality assurance and enhancement is premised on “efforts to create an institutional culture marked by self-criticism, openness to criticism by others, and a commitment to improvement in practice.” Thus, both self-evaluation and external evaluation should be emphasized in the quest for quality degree programming by public universities in Kenya. However, this must never be at the expense of the quality and competence of the graduates. Students, their families, employers, and other stakeholders should be confident that the education received at the university is of

comparable value to that from any other reputable university and that the graduates will be able to meet the work place challenges or demands for higher education.

In this study, we discussed quality assurance of higher education in Alberta and Kenya. Alberta has a long history of quality assurance of their degree programming and World-class universities. Despite the challenges both face in their quest for assuring and enhancing quality of their higher education, there are lessons from their experience that would be valuable to Kenya and other developing nations. These include transparency, accountability, and increased emphasis on external review of quality assurance processes of both institutions and quality assurance agencies. Quality assurance should not be reduced to rules of inspection and control, but rather should aim at enhancing quality of degree programming while upholding institutional independence and accountability, and producing competent graduates who are ready to participate in the workplace.

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