Market Policy Reforms and Education Quality in Public Higher Education in Tanzania: The Role of Quality Assurance Mechanisms

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Abstract
Globally, following financial austerity facing universities, many Higher Education (HE) systems have introduced Market Policy Reforms (MPR) as an alternative way of providing solutions on how states should finance higher education, increase access, and manage HE systems efficiently and effectively. The study used a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study design. Qualitative data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews were subjected to content and thematic analysis. The study findings showed how mechanisms of quality assurance work to ensure quality in HE institutions. For instance, institutionalising quality assurance guidelines policies from the Tanzania Commission for universities is an essential mechanism that forces universities to comply with the set guidelines and circulars. Also, the directorates of Quality Assurance (QA) play a significant role in inculcating a culture of quality assurance practices to achieve the university's core mission. The implementation of MPR has influenced the access of a significant number of students, but expansion of access does not commensurate with available resources. The study recommends that at times of massification, external and internal QA mechanisms are indispensable for promoting and maintaining quality standards in HEIs.

Keywords: *Market Policy Reforms, Higher Education Institutions, Quality Education*

INTRODUCTION

Education quality in Higher education (HE) has been a subject of debate since the introduction and implementation of Market Policy Reforms

(MPR) in Sub-Saharan Africa higher education systems (Yang & McCall 2014; Varghese, 2013; Varghese, 2016) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Tanzania (Watengere, 2016). However, there seems to be a consensus that the origin of the most recent quality crises in higher education in SSA could be associated with the economic shocks that faced many countries on the continent in the 1970s and 1980s. The global economic crunch made governments to face balance of payments deficits so severe that had to accept short- and long-term credits under the WB and IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) (Boit & Kipkoech, 2011). Basically, the foci of SAPs were on macro-economic adjustments and adopting neo-liberal policies centred on the liberalisation of trade and foreign investments, deregulation, and privatisation (Kentikelenis, et.al, 2014). Macroeconomic adjustments entailed fiscal austerity measures including reducing public spending on social services to redirect the resources to the sectors considered key to stabilising macro-economic conditions (Gudo & Oanda, 2011).

The WB policy document, "Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Adjustment, Revitalisation and Expansion (1988), building on the previous document, "Financing Education in Developing Countries: An Exploration of policy Options" (WB, 1986), employed studies on the rate of return to investment in education to advocate for directing resources to primary education away from higher education. A closely related policy document, "Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience" (WB, 1994) advocated for marketisation and liberalisation of higher education arguably it was unresponsive to the labour market needs, inefficient and expensive relative to its outputs. Consequently, public higher education systems in SSA were gradually underfunded by exchequers. The declining public subventions to recurrent and development budgets instigated the adoption of MPR in public higher education institutions with diversification of revenue sources, cost cutting, operational efficiency, productivity and responding to consumer demands featuring on the menu of their rolling plans' strategic objectives. This led to partial privatisation of public higher education institutions through cost-sharing, commercialisation of core functions and corporatisation of management and governance, euphemistically termed as Institutional Transformation Programmes (ITPs) (University of Dar es Salaam, 2015). With private sector participation and proliferation of private institutions higher education became competitive and expanded quantitatively to rates that SSA had never witnessed in decades (Yang & McCall, 2014; Varghese,

2016). In the long run, facilities, financial and human resource could not keep pace with the increasing number of students (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2018). This gave rise to concern about the quality of education services offered in higher education institutions and efficiency and effectiveness of higher education systems (Sonia & Rose, 2016). Demand for quality and accountability coupled by internationalisation of higher education marked the genesis of institutionalisation of quality assurance and control in SSA higher education systems and institutions.

The Tanzania context

Upon gaining political independence in 1961, the country prioritised investment in human capital for a sustainable economic base and efficient and effective government (Mkude, Cooksey & Levy, 2003). The Arusha Declaration of 1967 enunciated the political philosophy of socialism and self-reliance, and egalitarianism as an ideology to guide the country economic and social development initiatives, policies, and strategies. In that regard, public provision, and financing of social services, including higher education, became an incontestable obligation of the State (Mgaiwa & Ishengoma, 2017). However, by the 1980s the egalitarian redistribution policies were financially unsustainable due balance of payments deficit amidst large development and recurrent expenditures required to maintain capital investments and training the workforce to run and manage the social services, respectively.

The adoption of the IMF and World Bank mandated SAPs was a logical corollary of resuscitating the ailing macro-economic conditions. The IMF and WB respective conditionality for financial assistance compelled the Tanzania Government to adjust its macro-economic policies and embrace neo-liberal and market led policy reforms in all sectors including social services (Mgaiwa, 2018a). Through the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 1995 and subsequently, the Higher Education Policy (HEP) of 1999, Tanzania liberalised its higher education by allowing and encouraging the private sector to establish and run private universities and other higher education institutions or in partnership with the government (URT, 2014). These policies recommended sharing higher education costs with the beneficiaries and improving funding through innovative income generation activities (Msigwa, 2016; Kossey & Ishengoma, 2017; Ngawaiya, 2018b). The aims were to supplement the diminished and unpredictable subventions from the State concerning the public provision,

expand access to, and improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of higher education (Ngawaiya & Ishengoma, 2023).

The liberalisation of higher education culminated into an increase in the demand for higher education, consequently, the rise in the number of institutions offering the service. Available data shows that by 2018/2019 (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020), there were a total of 53 fully fledged universities, university colleges and campuses in Tanzania Mainland, of which 70% (N=38) privately owned and managed. This compares unfavourably with only 2 public universities available in the 1990s. Student enrolments also continue to rise year after year. For example, in the 2005/2006 academic year, the number was 40,993; it increased to 206,305 in 2009/2010; 225,330 in 2015/2016) and 229,049 (2018/2019) (TCU, 2018a; 2018b; NBS, 2020). Mgaiwa and Ponsian (2016) have attributed the expansion of access and diversity of academic programmes to Public-Private Partnerships; however, it does appear that the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education are adversely affected.

The government of Tanzania established the Commission for Universities (TCU) Universities through Act No. 7 of 2005, designated and mandated as an agency for university quality assurance (TCU, 2016). Higher education institutions have internal policies and mechanisms to ensure the quality of education in their respective institutions. Nevertheless, researchers (Makulilo, 2012; Mgaiwa & Ishengoma, 2017) doubt the quality of education provided in the country's proliferated universities, campuses, and university colleges because evidence shows that facilities, equipment, and human resource are unable to cope with expanding enrolments. Despite the institutionalisation of quality assurance mechanisms both at national and institutional levels there is evidence of poor students' academic performance. This is explained by a mix of interrelated factors on the inputs side and teaching and learning processes which signify deficiency in the internal operations of higher education institutions (UNICEF, undated). Consequently, an increasing number of graduates notwithstanding, stakeholders continue to question the quality of education offered in the HEIs, and that of the graduates (Mgaiwa, 2021a). Anecdotal experience and empirical evidence suggest that graduates lack essential competencies and employability skills for the competitive labour market (Awiti, 2014; Wetengere, 2016; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Amani, 2017; Mgaiwa, 2021b). When quantity and

quality of higher education collide, the quality of graduates tends to suffer the most.

It followed that since the adoption and implementation of MPR in Tanzania, little is known whether higher education meets the required quality standards or not. There are doubts as to whether the adopted reforms have had an envisaged effect on the quality of higher education. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the practices employed in assuring the provision of quality education amid the implementation of MPR in public higher education institutions in Tanzania.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research approach and a multiple case study design to explore the practices employed in assuring quality education Tanzania's public HEIs. Epistemologically, this study was located within the constructivist paradigm. Purposive sampling was used to select 44 respondents for this study, including ten (10) top university executive management officials (i.e., DVCs and Directors), two (2) Quality Assurance officials, sixteen (16) staff members and sixteen (16) university students from two (2) selected public universities (i.e., Mzumbe University (MU) and University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) which are oldest universities and they have a history of implementing MPR through institutional transformation programmes. The population was chosen because were considered to have information about practices employed to ensure quality education during the implementation of MPR. Three methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews, documentary reviews, and focus group discussions) were employed for data collection. The collected data were subjected to content analysis. The intentions were to interpret and understand through categorised words, themes and concepts within the text and then analyse the results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quality Assurance mechanisms employed for the provision of quality education

The present study explored the influence of quality assurance practices employed in assuring the provision of quality education during the implementation of MPR in public HEIs in Tanzania.

Guidelines from the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU)

Our findings indicate that TCU requires universities to have a comprehensive and systematic framework that meets the minimum standards for the quality of programmes offered by respective universities and university colleges in the country. During interviews, it was established that adhering to the guidelines issued by the TCU occasionally serves as a mechanism for ensuring that institutions do not become degree mills. For example, one member of the academic staff had this to say:

> *We implement the MPR in line with the provided guidelines from TCU on minimum standards and qualifications of students for admission, qualifications of teaching staff and relevance of the curriculum, programmes and courses offered by academic* units (Interview: QA 04, 24th September 2020, HEI 'B,').

The above argument revealed that even though MPR have had influenced HEIs to provide opportunities for accessing and acquiring higher education, the deciding factor is the TCU set standards and benchmarks. HEIs are obliged to follow them if they wish to admit students, introduce new programmes, and employ teachers lest they compromise their registration and accreditation which are a mandate of the TCU (TCU, 2021)

Additionally, the quality of students admitted in the institutions depends on the minimum standards or entry points decided upon by TCU. This was confirmed by one of the quality assurance officers as follows:

> *TCU has published admission criteria for each academic programme at our university. There is no option for us to admit students without tagging the TCU* (Interview: QA 02, 19th September 2020).

This showed that TCU has an additional responsibility of assessing the quality of graduates of Advanced level secondary education defined as their performance in the examinations administered by the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) before being admitted in the institutions. One aspect worth noting is that TCU administers application windows but the admission process and the decision of who can be admitted according to available spaces are vested with the respective institutions. Whilst TCU appears to be focused on the quality of students for admission into HEIs, our findings revealed that the number of students who are admitted invariably does not commensurate with the human and

physical resources available in the institutions. For example, regarding the requisite number of academic staff one of the respondents argued that:

> *"In these institutions, the number of students has increased tremendously while the number of staff has remained more or less constant and those in higher academic ranks are few… those in the professorial ranks many are retiring or have retired (Interview; Staff 04, 19th September 2020).*

This view was supported by another interviewee that:

> *Universities easily deploy academics of lower ranks including Tutorial Assistants and Assistant Lecturers, but these categories of human resources do neither have the experience nor enough capacity to carry out quality assurance processes such as institutional self-assessments, quality audits, external examination and conduct tracer studies"* (Interview: Staff 01, 15th October 2020).

The foregoing excerpts suggest that although TCU has a legal mandate of universities' quality assurance it does not deal with factors which affect the university's internal efficiency and effectiveness such as a shortage of senior members of academic staff. Available statistics show that tutorial assistants and assistant lecturers constitute about 70% of the total population of academics in the country (TCU, 2019). The emerging general picture is that inadequate funds necessitate the need to admit students in large numbers to generate income from tuition fees and direct costs payable to the institutions. This is a subtle agenda subsumed in the MPR broader goals of diversifying sources of revenue, cost cutting, operational efficiency, productivity, and response to consumer demands.

It appears that TCU and universities were focusing on student admissions which at best are proxies for quantitative expansion at the expense of the academic reputation of the institutions and things that really make a difference in the teaching and learning process such as quality of academic staff, physical facilities, and infrastructure. Yet, according to TCU (2016; 2021), it is mandated to make sure that there are improvements in the quality and quantity of academic staff, availability of teaching and learning resources and institutionalise the University Qualifications Framework (UQF) to curb academic fraud which could be occasioned by a surge in the number of institutions all competing for students.

The TCU mandates as a regulatory body are imperative for university education quality management. Nevertheless, available findings

(McDonnell & Elmore 1987; Mgaiwa, 2021) suggest that often it is hard to achieve goals of quality education in the universities through policy instruments and guidelines with externally mandated standards or procedures because these institutions are professional bureaucracies embracing the collegial and political models of governance. It is possible to argue that MPR have served to shift the locus of responsibility for quality higher education away from the State towards institutions which are labelled as 'providers', cashing on demand for higher education by students who are labelled as 'customers', in the higher education market regulated by TCU. The challenge is how to strike a balance between maintaining the academic core, which is the *raison dêtre* of public higher education institutions and pursuing commercialisation and entrepreneurial interests which are tenets of MPR.

The institutionalisation of Quality Assurance Policies

The study revealed that each institution has its own binding QA policy which guides the management of academic activities. One of the institution's QA policy documents states that:

> *"Like other universities which embrace quality assurance…. [The] University developed its Quality Assurance Policy in 2010… This enabled the university to systematically approach quality assurance to enhance the quality of training, research, community services, and internal support services."* (Documentary Review; HEI 'B', 2017, p. 8).

The statement above suggests that for any higher education to move towards the knowledge economy for the achievement of Education All (EFA) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the quality of education must be assured by the establishment of quality assurance systems.

The institutions' QA policy documents that were reviewed in the present study stipulate standard criteria for admissions, qualification of academics, acceptable workload, staff-student ratio, research, and public service to the community. The criteria were intended for quality checking, monitoring, and evaluating institutional performance while fulfilling their core mission of teaching excellence. For example, during interviews, one of the QA directors proffered the following:

> *...the directorate of quality assurance exists to put quality assurance systems and structures in place. They are supported with quality*

> *assurance policies for admissions, teaching, curriculum development and staff recruitment. As part of our commitment to QA in the country and region, our universities adhere to the East African Inter-University Council (IUCEA) protocol for quality assurance* (Interview: DQA 06, 30th September 2020).

The above quote indicates a consensus on establishing quality assurance systems and fulfilment of the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) requirement, of harmonising quality standards for higher education within the East Africa region and in line with global quality standards.

One of the aims of the MPR in Tanzania is for public universities to produce graduates that are globally competitive and employable (URT, 2014). Therefore, higher education institutions are required to have internal quality assurance mechanisms as a key aspect of quality management. This was once highlighted by Mok (2000) that quality is an international concern that public and private universities must seriously handle. Therefore, institutional policies provide a general guide for monitoring and evaluating quality in all aspects of institutional operations to ensure they attain a high standard of achievement in their products.

Existence of Quality Directorates and Bureaus within HEIs

The implementation of MPR emphasises access and quality of products, factors which influence how students are prepared in the universities. In that regard, it is a requirement by TCU (2016) that all public and private universities have well-established QA units and departments that can monitor all processes of providing knowledge and skills for quality products. TCU (2021) outlines the functions and responsibilities of QA directorates. Among them is the implementation of university quality assurance policies for improving the quality of teaching, research and community outreach programmes offered by universities and to promote the development of a vibrant intellectual community. Another function is inculcating a culture of quality assurance in all university operations, safeguarding national and international academic standards and sustaining accreditation status.

Findings from this study revealed that the sampled institutions have QA directorates and units. It was also found that the directorates and units performed several functions to ensure the quality of teaching, research,

and consultancy services and that the university complies with the TCU guidelines in that regard. One member of the academic staff lamented the following:

> *Our university QA bureau was established to ensure that quality is maintained by checking the quality of every university activity… including staff, their qualifications and programmes that are offered in the institutions… (Interview: Staff 03, 14th September 2020).*

The foregoing was supported by a quality assurance official who said:

> *The quality assurance directorate is here to monitor, coordinate and supervise all teaching and learning processes at the university* (Interview: QA 02, 7th October 2020).

The above narrations signify a motive behind establishing quality assurance directorates and departments in higher education institutions which is to achieve and maintain quality standards in carrying out their day-to-day mandated role of constantly monitoring and evaluating quality assurance processes. The findings have shown that one critical role of the directorates is to determine the extent to which internal quality standards for measuring performance in core operational areas of the university are met and updated.

However, despite the critical role played by directorates, bureaus, departments or units, nomenclature notwithstanding, the findings further revealed that the institution's budget allocations were inadequate to cater for the operational costs of QA activities. In most cases allocated funds are not disbursed as planned. Arguably, the unpredictability of funding to QA directorates is one of the sources of directorates' inefficiencies and ineffectiveness.

In addition, the findings indicated that there were quality assurance committees found in schools, colleges, and faculties. The main function of these committees is to ensure the provision of quality education in their respective units. A top executive management officer summarised the significance of these committees in this way:

> *Quality assurance committees work as internal auditors by monitoring and supervising academic activities that are supposed to be done in the colleges, schools, and departments. For example, if lectures are not offered, student seminars are not conducted, and course evaluation forms*

> *are not collected… they will come back to you and ask what happened? Because of that, things have changed; we have weekly attendance logs, therefore when it comes to the first week of the semester… we usually start teaching on the very first day; because of failure to do so, internal QA auditors will come and ask you to detail your absenteeism…* (Interview: VC 01, 9th October 2020).

The excerpt above implies that the functions of quality assurance committees have had an influence on the quality of education provided in higher education institutions. In this regard, one can argue that the outcomes of MPR on the quality of higher education hinge crucially on the effectiveness of internal QA mechanisms including quality assurance committees. This argument concurs with TCU's (2006) guidelines that require institutions to have effective quality assurance management systems.

Overall, whilst the directorates, bureaus, departments, and units vested with QA are key internal institutional QA mechanisms, the scope of their activities is narrow in the sense that they are exclusively focusing on university teaching and examinations-related activities with less vibrancy in other aspects of universities mission with respect to research and public service. They tend to report inadequacies, but institutions have poor responsiveness to addressing issues raised in the QA reports. More importantly, the directorate, bureaus, departments, and units do not have funds of their own but rely on institutional funding. Apparently, this seems to be a conflict of interest. The University management which funds QA activities is the one which must implement the recommendations of QA reports. Closely related to that observation, directors of QA are appointees of University Management.

Provision of teaching and learning resources

The findings revealed that adequate teaching and learning resources is a key factor for quality education. Academic and non-academic members of staff who were interviewed attested that non-availability and inadequacy of teaching and learning resources may affect quality improvement. For example, one of them said:

> *Honestly speaking, as the number of admitted students increases…the number of students in my class also expands. However, the teaching environment and materials facilitating the teaching process remain the same…* (Interview: Staff 01, 17th September 2020).

Similarly, other interviewees said:

> *Physical facilities and infrastructure are available however are not enough compared to the number of students, which affects academic activities…We also use E-learning which is not easy to accommodate all the demands…* (Interview: Staff 05, 4th October 2020).

> *… It is easy to admit students, but it is not easy to build structures in a short period because it needs a lot of money and a big budget…because of that universities have inadequate infrastructure amid exploded enrolments…* (Interview: Staff 06, 10th September 2020).

Furthermore, a student also commented on the inadequacy of physical resources and its implication on the quality of education offered:

> *…Buildings are not enough, and they cause discomfort to students to learn. For example, there is a time when you are forced to stand outside at the window and listen to a lecture because of the lack of space in the classroom…Lecture halls are overcrowded...* (FGD: Student 02, 4th October 2020).

The above narrations generally suggest that although the implementation of MPR has significantly increased student access to higher education, the inadequacy of physical infrastructure as an input to the teaching and learning process has primarily affected the quality of education offered in the higher education institutions. The notion of facilities capacity utilisation was beyond the scope of the present study; however, the above findings support the assertion by Barrett and Sorensen (2015) that teaching and learning resources are among the most crucial aspects that may influence better quality education in any education system. These findings further align with Ishengoma's (2007) arguments that student enrolment expansion should match the expansion of educational facilities to realise the quality of education in higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of MPR in higher education has occasioned a quest for quality practices. Therefore, the present study examined the mechanisms employed by higher education institutions for quality management. From the findings, the mechanisms include institutionalising TCU quality assurance guidelines, developing quality assurance policies, establishing quality assurance directorates, and

providing teaching and learning resources. The institutionalisation of TCU quality assurance guidelines ensures the universities comply with regional and international higher education quality standards. Directorates, bureaus, departments, and QA units are a cog in the wheel of inculcating the culture of quality assurance in the university's core mission. Whilst the implementation of the MPR has significantly increased students' enrolment into higher education institutions, significant expansion of access apparently does not commensurate with available resources. This has adversely affected the quality of education offered in the institutions and, subsequently the products of higher education system in Tanzania.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above conclusions, the following recommendations are proffered: First, implementing quality assurance practices is the mechanism of assuring quality in higher education. The institutions must build a quality culture by institutionalising effective quality assurance policies and guidelines. Second, the institutions must comply with externally mandated QA mechanisms such as those from TCU and IUCEA. Third, the QA is a huge undertaking that must be allocated enough resources to be effective. Finally, TCU, as a regulatory agency for university education and institutions' leadership should occasionally improve QA guidelines and policies in response to demands of emerging QA practices and culture.

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