QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA: TRENDS, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

- Macro-context of Distance Higher Education in Africa
- Mm
- Push factors for Higher Education Policy Development in Africa
- Motivation for concern with Quality Assurance
- Trends in Quality Assurance for Distance Higher Education in Africa
INTRODUCTION

- Issues in quality Assurance for Distance Higher Education in Africa
- Challenges for Distance Higher Education in Africa
- Implications for policy, management, capacity building and international cooperation
- Suggestions on way forward
Africa, as a continent has:

- **World’s highest illiteracy rates**
  - (Tertiary cross-enrolment ratio: Africa 5%, East Asia and the Pacific 24%, North America and Western Europe 70% - UNESCO, 2009)

- **Lowest participation rates**

- **Huge capacity development needs while suffering the highest brain drain**

- **Massive demand for tertiary education**
  - (Average of only 25% of high school leavers who qualify get admission to regular residential face-to-face universities)
Policy development is both a response to and a consequence of). In Africa, key push factors that underlie the thrust for higher education policy development include the following:

- **Poverty**
  - *Defined* as not only a measure of lack of income but lack of access to services and opportunities for human development, and lack of a voice in political life and decision making; social subordination and exclusion (DFID, 2003:13).
  - *Manifested* in high mortality rates, food insecurity, high illiteracy rates, poor living and working conditions, and bad governance.
  - *Implies* that higher education is (or should be) conceptualized as a tool for empowerment; as a process by which individuals acquire the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society.
Disease – especially HIV/AIDS pandemic which:

- Has led to the reduction, through death, of the most economically productive members of society and to subsequent increase of dependants (especially orphans) who need care.

- Diverts resources from development oriented activities and programs to the care, support and treatment of HIV/AIDS affected and infected individuals, and to campaign against its spread.

- Kills up to 700 people a day in some African countries and results into up to 60% of bed capacity in hospitals being occupied by HIV/AIDS patients and caring relatives.

- Implies that because Africa has the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates world-wide and also records the highest mortality arising from malaria and other preventable water-borne diseases, eradication of disease is a priority and competing factor that directly impacts on financing higher education policy development.
PUSH FACTORS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- Impetus of Political Democratization – where:
  - Competitive elective politics is thrusting policy debates including education, as key campaign issues by political parties in most African countries.
  - Entrenchment of multi-party democracy coupled with emergent vibrant civil society movements in Africa have considerably widened the democratic space, raised levels of civic engagement by the populace and enhanced the demand for accountability and transparency in public affairs.
  - Enhancement of political democratization, through institutionalization of civic rights and public watchdog bodies that check the executive (government) has and will continue to be a major push factor for higher education policy development.
International and regional pressure – on national governments, partly as a result of globalization, has:

- Led to a relative loss of national policy autonomy.
- Acted as a stimulus for regional co-operation and policy integration.
- Implied that the thrust for higher education policy development in Africa is not only informed by, but also influenced by regional and international treaties, protocols and other imperatives for global integration and competitiveness (examples include: African Union, SADC, EAC, COMESA, ECOWAS).
Brain Drain

- Arises from (a) Wage differentials (Kenya as an example where a Member of Parliament earns $10,000 per month, University Professor $2,500 while Secondary school teacher earns $400 and a watchman $63), (b) Rapid population growth among young people, (c) Armed conflict (DRC Congo, Somalia, Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia as examples), and (d) Poor working conditions, among other factors.

- It has been estimated that up to 30-50% of the developing world’s population trained in science and technology live in the developed world (United Nations, 2007). Doctors and Nurses worst affected.

- Implies that even under the prevailing discourses about brain gain and brain drain, unless higher education policy development innovatively addresses the disproportionate out-flow of skilled workforce from Africa, the continent will continue experiencing a mismatch between the needed and available skill requirements.
PUSH FACTORS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- **Rapid developments in ICTs**
  - Which not only present new opportunities but also challenge traditional modes of knowledge development, teaching and learning

- **Influx of foreign providers of education to African students in Africa (cross-border provision of education)**
  - Questions that have arisen relating to quality and relevance of what is offered by foreign organizations, some of which are not even accredited in their “home” countries, imply that there is need for internationally recognized benchmarks against which comparison and evaluation of qualifications, both academic and professional, may be made, and hence the influx constitute one of the major push factors for higher education policy development.
PUSH FACTORS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- **Surge in demand for access to education at all levels, which:**
  - Has increasingly forced governments to re-think and reprioritize financial resource allocations between competing sectors of the country's education sectors.
  - In Africa, the bias in resource allocation has been against higher education and in favour of basic education, with strong support from “development partners”.
ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING ADVOCASY FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

- **Broadening Access (to Higher Education) for Numerous Groups**
  - School leavers who are unable to access regular universities and colleges.
  - Women who would otherwise be tied down by domestic responsibilities.
  - The poor, marginalized, underprivileged, un-reached, rural and isolated groups (Dhanarajan, G. 2001).

- **Cheaper and therefore Affordable**
  - Reduces cost of participation in higher education

- **Provision of Flexible Learning Opportunities**
  - Time, Place, pace and content
ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING ADVOCASY FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

- **For Adult, Independent Learners**

- **For Academic Rejects/Dwarfs, Poor Performers, and “soft” subjects/disciplines only.**
  - Usually implied by popular discourses among students, general public and even policy makers
  - Not first choice but last resort mode of study

- **For Economic gain**
  - Considered an Income Generating Unit especially by private providers and most dual-mode universities

**NOTE:** These assumptions significantly influence policy and practice of Distance Higher Education, and must be interrogated.
WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED WITH QUALITY ASSURANCE?

- Quality as a concept is not only difficult to define but also problematic to measure.

- Quality Assurance is now ranked top priority and agenda in virtually every country and organization worldwide, and Africa is no exception.

- Assuring quality is a fundamental pre-requisite for gaining and maintaining credibility for programmes, institutions and national systems of higher education (Ref: Commonwealth of Learning).
  - Credibility must be gained and maintained!
WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED WITH QUALITY ASSURANCE?

- Growing, consistent and persistent public demand for Distance Higher Education institutions to prove that the quality of student learning and the quality of our products and outcomes are as good as [if not better than] that obtaining in the conventional face-to-face universities.

- Spiraling and compelling need for distance higher education institutions to build, enhance and sustain greater public confidence, student motivation and satisfaction as well as efficient processes in our

- Inaction would mean surrender acceptance of manipulation by forces external to universities.
APPROACHES AND TRENDS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN AFRICAN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

- Programme and Course Development
- External Examiners
- Materials Development
- Learners Support
- Internal self-Assessment
- Accreditation
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

- National Regulatory Bodies and Higher Education Policies
  - Contestation: Should distance higher education institutions (ODL Universities) be subjected to and made to comply with quality assurance procedures and processes imposed by National regulatory bodies which are operating under regimes designed for conventional universities?

- Defining and measuring quality of DHE
  - How to define and measure quality in the face of a multiplicity of expectations and indicators modeled on conventional universities: number of graduates, throughput rates, full-time equivalencies, etc.
  - Balance between quality as a perception, quality as a process, and quality as a measure.
Public Accountability Dilemma

While public accountability is increasingly being demanded of African Open and Distance Higher education institutions, including self-assessments reports, many universities are questioning the extent to which they should subject themselves to public scrutiny and debate, and whether this may not lead to self-destruction.

The result of this is a certain degree of cautiousness in what is reported to the public especially in terms of the success rates and completion rates. Universities find it more comfortable to report access rates only, arguing that the public is already biased or holding negative perceptions of distance higher education and aggravation of the situation is least desirable.
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES (Cont’d)

- **Cost-effectiveness, Equity and Quality Dilemma**
  - How should African Open and Distance Higher Education institutions achieve, ensure and indeed demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of Open and Distance Learning in the face of constricted funded from the state, drive for profit by private providers, and skewed distribution of ICT infrastructure?

- **Radically Changing Student profiles**
  - While ODL institutions were traditionally targeting adult learners, there is now an influx of direct entrants from high school and increasing demand for space by younger unemployed learners who also flood campuses on daily basis.
  - Implications for learner support is a major challenge.
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES (Cont’d)

- Capacity building for ODL Lecturers and managers