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ODeL and the Quest for Quality Higher Education in Africa

Issue at-hand

African higher education is at the crossroads. After a few decades of sustained growth in terms of relative expansion (still below world average), the sub-sector has embarked on the quest for quality. Indeed, the quality of African universities, in other words their internal and external efficiency, has always been a source of concern. For instance, only ten institutions on the continent have been ranked within the world's top 1,000 universities in 2015-2016. This assessment carried out by the Center for World University Rankings (CWUR), a Saudi Arabia-based education consulting organization is based on criteria ranging from the quality of graduates (those with highly sought-after skills and competencies) and faculty to patent filings, publications and citations. Even though a few academics have contested the validity of this ranking, the truth remains that graduates from African universities find it difficult to compete on the global job market and Africa's scientific knowledge production and contribution to the world's knowledge base has been estimated at a mere 1.1% of the total (Kariuku, 2015).

Several initiatives have been launched to address this situation at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. There has been a surge in the creation of quality assurance frameworks starting with the Arusha Convention in 1981 which sought to address the fragmentation of higher education in Africa through regional co-operation and the mutual recognition of qualifications. The Convention has ever since given impetus to new developments going in the right direction as regards quality. At the national level, many African countries have created regulatory bodies to ensure that both public and private universities adhere to internationally-recognized standards of quality. At the sub-regional level, geographical and/or linguistic blocks have been created to entrench quality standards within universities such as the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES) for the French-speaking universities, the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) and the Technical Committee of the Southern

African Development Council (SADC); and the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) which is embedded within the East African Community (EAC). At the regional level, the African Union (AU) is pushing for the harmonization of the quality assurance frameworks and the Association of African Universities (AAU) has created the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) with the view to providing assistance to institutions concerned with Quality Assurance in higher education in Africa.

As much as these initiatives are important in bringing center stage the policy discourse on quality at the national, sub-regional and regional levels, it is at the institutional level that the fight for quality will be won as evidence suggests. The advent of Open and Distance eLearning (ODeL) in African universities is providing a unique opportunity to reform higher education through the mainstreaming of internationally recognized standards of quality.

Policy Recommendation: Use ODeL integration in African universities to institutionalize quality assurance practices

The integration of ODeL in the teaching and learning practices in African higher education institutions is an irreversible phenomenon. The traditional/conventional teaching mode, also known as the face-to face teaching, is increasingly being supplemented by eLearning; and for an increasing number of students who are learning in the comfort of their homes and offices, it has become the only learning method.

 ODeL has brought with it a major paradigm shift in curriculum development, pedagogy and instructional material development as information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become the media of instruction. The 21st century classroom learning environment has also changed. Students and teachers have an increased access to wireless networks, digital technologies and mobile computing devices. The students are also different. They are more active in the learning and teaching processes and collaboration and communication among them is done virtually and vicariously. Online forums and communities through social media have emerged and provide opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and research.

Institutionalizing quality assurance frameworks in this environment is much easier than trying to break old-habits/practices in conventional university contexts using policies and ad hoc training through conferences and workshops. For instance, many higher education institutions in East Africa are taking advantage of ODeL integration to establish internal quality assurance systems by setting up quality assurance units, developing policies and frameworks, conducting internal program and institutional assessments and benchmarking. Faculty professional development, a difficult reform to implement in the past, is increasingly being mainstreamed into most of the programs offered by universities.

In a paper entitled "*The Practices in Quality Assurance System for Courseware Development at the Open and Distance Learning: A Case of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL)*" presented by Odumbe and Misiko at the 2016 3[rd]International Conference of African Virtual University, quality assurance in ODeL is defined as "*a process in the entire operations involved in the implementation of distance education programmes. It involves the Management that supports distance education, the courseware materials, academic, technical and pastoral support services provided to the learners*." This definition is from two practitioners who are currently transforming their institution into a quality dual mode university (*Odumbe and Misiko are respectively Director and Coordinator of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning of the University of Nairobi*).

In their study, Odumbe and Misiko specifically focused on one particular aspect of the quality assurance framework being implemented at the University of Nairobi (UON): *the quality assurance practices for instructional materials development* at the CODL in collaboration with internal Schools and Faculties at the UON. They provide a detailed description of the practices while at the same time benchmarking UON based on internationally-recognized criteria for quality ODeL such as those of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). This led them to conclude that "*Distance instructional materials could address the challenges of quality of teaching faced in the universities due to escalating numbers of new universities by integrating open and distance learning materials in the mode of delivery for all students. It would mean that all students will have access to standard instructional material developed by a qualified and experienced scholar as opposed to being taught by a less qualified person who may also lack experience*".

Among the evidence put forth to back up the above assertion the following are noteworthy: (i) instructional modules developed have demonstrated their capability of bringing about the desired change in knowledge, skills or performance of the target group that uses them; (ii) the performance of students in the open and distance learning programs compares very well with that of the students following their courses in the conventional face-to-face mode of delivery. For instance, distance science students who use the materials developed by CODL perform comparatively very well with students at the UON's School of Education who follow the conventional modes of delivery that are largely using face-to-face instruction.

Another powerful, albeit anecdotal evidence, is when students in the School of Dentistry of the UON expressed their preference for eLearning materials uploaded on the website as the better way of learning the theoretical parts of their courses. They indicated that "*eLearning materials with good illustrations, explanations and activities prepare them for their practical work better than face to face teaching as they are able to revisit the modules when they need to do so*".

Recommendations

The main recommendation with regard to using ODeL as the means for improving quality education in African universities is provided by Odumbe and Misiko who have indicated that universities they collaborate with, namely Moi University, Egerton University, African Nazarene University and Laikipia University among others, have adopted CODL quality assurance strategies as 'Best Practice'. Therefore, and to the attention of policymakers and university leaders:

- opportunities for experience sharing and cross-fertilization should be provided within AfriQAN and other sub-regional and regional groupings.

- additional research is needed to document how ODeL is changing the quality of education at the tertiary level in Africa.

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