Full Length Research Paper

Improvement towards excellence: internal quality assurance review

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The purpose of this paper is to report the outcomes of internal quality assurance at departmental level within an institution of higher education. The objective of the quality evaluations is to promote improvement towards excellence.This paper will focus on interviews conducted amongst students and teaching staff in the Department of Creative Design, at the University of Rwanda. As educators in the department, we have been involved in the quality assurance reviews in aspects of student experience, course module reviews and achievement of intended teaching and learning outcomes.

Keyword: Higher Education Institutions, Quality Assurance

INTRODUCTION

Doctor Sanjaya, (2007) of the Research Institute of Distance Education at the Indira Gandhi Open University, describes higher education institutions as a resource feeder system that provides human resources for many sectors, such as management, planning, design and research. She asserts that economic growth, scientific and technological advancement of a country is dependent on the higher education system, as much as on the availability of human capacity of the working class. Mishra concludes that higher education provides opportunities for life long learning, which allows individuals to upgrade their knowledge and skills in different subject matter, based on the needs of the society and country (2007).

According to the Kothari Commission (1966) the role of higher education institutions in society is to cultivate knowledge and engage fearlessly in the pursuit of truth and the interpretation of old knowledge and beliefs, with regard to needs and discoveries. The Commision states that through the diffusion of education, higher education institutions should aim to promote quality, reduce social and cultural differences, and provide competent individuals trained in various professions, imbibed with a sense of social purpose to the society (1966). This view corresponds with insights from Mishra that the quality of higher education decides the quality of human resources in a country (Kothari Commission, 1966; Mishra, 2007).

The British Standards Institution (BSI) defines 'quality' as "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on it's ability to satisfy implied needs" (BSI, 1991: 13). The institution further describes quality as the outcome of systems and procedures set up for a purpose (1991). Lastly, the British Standards Institution explains that quality as a culture should recognize the importance of institutional review as a process towards improvement, to achieve the standard and transformation in the direction of excellence (British Standards Institution, 1966).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality assurance in higher education institutions in the United States of America (USA) is done through an accreditation process that ensures that education provides, meets and maintains standards of quality and intergrity in light of academics, administration and other related services (British Standards Institution, 1991).

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is centralized as an independent entity which is funded by subscription from institutions of higher education (British Standards Institutions, 1991). The role of the agency is to provide public assurance that quality standards within the institutions are enhanced and safeguarded (British Standards Institution, 1991). The quality assurance is done through institutional audits and subject reviews that ensure that higher education is providing awards and qualification of

an acceptable and appropriate academic quality standard (British Standards Institution, 1991).

The educational policy in Rwanda, according to the Ministry of Education Sector Strategic Plan (2010), continues to improve towards excellence by integrating curriculum development, the introduction of English as a medium of instruction and setting up quality assurance systems that monitor the achievement of learning at all education levels. This report highlights poor supply of learning materials and the lack of systems that monitor learning outcomes as some of the challenges in improving quality of education in the country (Ministry of Education Sector Strategic Plan, 2010).

The Ministry of Education Higher Education Policy (2008), describes higher education institutions as the primary tool for social and economic development of the society or country to be competitive, both nationally and internationally. The policy affirms that the effectiveness of development interventions within the country are dependent on the higher education system, in enhancing human capital development, providing research and innovation, which in turn supports the process of transformation (2008). The Minister of Education, Doctor Gahakwa Daphrose claims that the Ministry of Education has ambitions for the development of higher education and its role towards the realisation of the country's vision 2020 (Ministry of Education Higher Education Policy, 2008).

In Rwanda, quality assurance is done through the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). The primary mission of NCHE is to ensure that higher learning institutions train individuals capable of playing their part in the social and economic development of Rwanda (National Council for Higher Education Service Charter, 2011). The Executive Director of the National Council, Geoffrey Rugege explains that the Higher Education Council is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the quality and standard of learning, teaching and research in educational institutions (National Council for Education Servie Charter, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Each department within institutions of higher education, in this case, the University of Rwanda, is required to periodically review and evaluate academic programes, achievement of students learning and to describe challenges and opportunities that may hamper the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The internal reviews are geared to provide knowledge and understanding of departmental needs that can be beneficial in planning for the future. The course modules are reviewed to ensure that programmes remain current and valid in terms of knowledge, skills development and practical application in any discipline. The course modules are reviewed to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum in relation to the intended learning outcomes.

To collect data for this paper, students and teaching staff members in the Department of Creative Design were interviewed during the course of three semesters, from September 2013 to December 2014. Students were asked to share their views with regard to learning materials, teaching methods and the content covered in each course module. For the interviews, students were chosen randomly from 1st to 4th year levels of study. The teaching staff members were also selected randomly based on availability during the data gathering process. They were asked similar questions as the students. However, their interviews went on to inquire about the challenges they may be facing and recommendations, if any, for improving different aspects of the course modules they are facilitating.

DISCUSSION

As aforementioned, the interviews were conducted over three academic semesters. The views expressed by students currently at the 2rd year level correspond to those received from 1st year and 3rd year students, who had participated in the quality assurance interviews conducted whilst they were in 2nd year. This suggests that many of the experiences appear similar for the group of students, from 1st to 4th year presently. Generally, students have been satisfied with the perfomance of teaching staff with regard to the preparation and planning of teaching content, punctuality of lecturers and timeous feedback on assignments.

Some of the issues raised during the interviews include the lack of materials and equipment for some course modules, which then requires students to cover the cost of purchase for these materials. There is a library on campus but students admit that they do not take advantage of these services and resources available to them. Instead, they prefer to do research through internet resources only. Some students do not have personal computers, which makes it difficult for them to complete assignments on time. Also, the university computer lab is closed after office hours when students have the time to work on their projects. There are a few course modules students found difficult to differentiate with regard to the content of the course module. Lastly, students suggested some changes to the setup of the timetable. They prefer to have theory modules in the morning and studio modules in the afternoon.

Comparing these responses to those from the teaching staff, it seems that one of the attendant issues within the department is the usage of the campus library. While students opt to do research on internet, teaching staff highly recommends that students frequent the library to read and research. This recommendation is

based on the need for students to improve their understanding and fluency in the English language.

In Rwanda, the medium of instruction in educational institutions was changed recently from Francophone to English. Thus, many students are not able to articulately express themselves in English. One of the ways to gain fluency and comprehension of a language is through reading. As mentioned in the introduction, the Ministry of Education Sector Strategic Plan (2010) highlights the lack of systems to improve and monitor learning achievement and attainment of basic literacy skills in the country. In addition, the Ministry report mentions the insufficient supply of learning materials and equipment in schools, colleges and universities (Ministry of Education Strategic Plan, 2010).

Therefore, some of the departmental challenges appear to not be internal issues but national problems, which could hinder the development and improvement of quality in higher education institutions. For a department, it may be difficult to solve problems rooted in the planning and set up of systems at national level. The negative impact of this synergy is visible in the similarity of experiences and challenges from 1st to 4th year students, over the cause of fourteen months, which makes up three academic semesters.

Researchers, Bawe Nsamenang and Theresa Tchumbe (2011) from the Human Development Resource Centre in Cameroon argue that in Africa, educational institutions have not achieved to provide economic growth and societal development because the education system appears to produce faintly literate and numerate graduates, with limited mastery knowledge and competence in many disciplines. They state that the elimination of indigenous African heritage from students behavioural repertoire could be responsible for the inability to master the intricasies of the Western country's knowledge and education systems (2011). Tsamenang and Tchumbe (2011) conclude that African education is not improving the quality of life despite the increase in enrollment and students enthusiasm to learn.

An article titled *'Cultural Identity in an African Context: Indigenous Education and Curriculum in East Africa'* by Ladislaus Semali and Amy Stambach (1997) state that a curriculum that divides indigenous knowledge from modern knowledge systems fails to teach students about their unique cultural identities and patterns, which are important aspects in developing and advancing individuals' social and economic worlds (as cited in Nsamenang and Tchumbe, 2011). These authors argue that 'modern education' currently in place in Africa is deeply influenced by formal Western style education system, which can be associated with Western thoughts, behaviours and orientation of educators. Semali and Stambach claim that Western style education systems tend to render indigenous knowledge and the culturally diverse societies of Africa as inferior (as cited in Nsamenang and Tchumbe, 2011).

In this regard, Peter Baguma and Irene Aheisibwe (1997) explain that the problem in the inclusion of indigenous knowledge into the modern education system can be blamed on the inability of the people to keep records (as cited in Nsamenang and Tchumbe, 2011). Baguma and Aheisibwe remark that the indigenous knowledge conserning many professions remains undocumented, which makes it difficult to include any of this knowledge into curricula at any level of study (as cited in Nsamenang and Tchumbe, 2011). They further claim that in Africa insecurity makes countries budget more for arms than on development of the education system and teachers (as cited in Nsamenang and Tchumbe, 2011). According to a report by UNESCO in 2008, the 1994 Genocide of Rwanda forced a large percentage of trained teachers into exile or they were murdered (also cited in, Nsamenang and Tchumbe, 2011).

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

The discussion will begin with a focus on the student evaluations and views from staff regarding each course module. This will be followed with a discussion on the process of reviewing the curriculum.

The student evaluations and interviews with teaching staff were useful. The information gained was used to report on the experiences of students and teaching staff. In addition, the views from both sources assisted in reviewing curriculum, which is done after every four years.

Based on the interviews carried out, it appears that there is a mindset amongst students of handling education and learning as only a survival strategy. There seems to be a lack of hunger for inspiration, growth and success professionally. Many of the lecturers expressed that at times they have to trick students to submit assignments on time. For theory based course modules, lecturers say that students do not try hard to understand the information, instead, they want to repeat the lecturers notes.

The same attitude is in part visible in studio based modules where students want to execute the same design concept. There is little desire to be different and unique, and the level of competitiveness amongst themselves is low. Challenging each other with class assignments is a good way to gain confidence, to work harder to conceptualize and execute the best design idea. However, this is only happening with at least one student out of twenty.

In addition to the teaching load, this matter has required lecturers to try to encourage individuality amongst the students. Lecturers have voiced that this exercise is time consuming considering the 14-week teaching time allocated for each module.

The issues above may be related to the lack of

systems to ensure learning achievement and improvement of literacy skills, which was highlighted in the Ministry of Education Sector Strategic Plan (2010). On the contrary, based on the interviews with the teaching staff, there is one resource, the library, available to students at all times but it is not utilized. As per recommendations by the teaching staff, that students should frequent the library, this would broaden their knowledge and improve their theoretical and practical design skills in many subjects. Also, researching from different sources can expand knowledge and increase the ability to understand any subject matter better.

It should be mentioned here that a mentorship system has been introduced as a possible solution to the need to build students character and sense of individuality. However, this program is currently at its infancy and will require review at a later stage.

With regard the reviewing of curriculum the interviews were informative. Students and teaching staff shared similar views on the difficulty to differentiate some course modules. Interestingly, according to the Head of Department (HOD) of the Department of Creative Design (CRD) the same modules that students and teaching staff highlighted had been previously noted in the external examiner's report. The external examiner is invited at the end of each semester to evaluate the students work.

Following four staff meetings to review curriculum, as a department we were able to first streamline the course modules that were problematic interms of description, the content, continuity and effectiveness. The modules that seemed to have similar content, we found that also their descriptions either overlapped or one of the modules was covering too much content. It was decided that these modules be merged but prior to that we looked at the continuity of each module from 1st to 4th year.

The point of departure was that we offered four specializations at the 3rd year level, namely Media Design, Communication Design, Environmental Design and Product Design. Thus, the course modules offered in 1st to the end of 2nd year should feed into these specializations in 3rd year and also provide some of the technical skills that may be required to execute the practical component of the research study in 4th year.

For example, Media and Communication Design was merged because they shared more than three modules. Some of the modules that were offered in Media and not in Communication, *visa versa*, were infact beneficial to both. This made it easy to now describe Media and Communication Design as one thing, which can also achieve well rounded knowledge and skills in that profession for students.

In essence, none of the modules were abandoned but three were added, two in 4th year and the other was recommended for all levels. The modules were distributed based on the intended outcomes at the 3rd

year level mainly and each lecturer was assigned a module to review, merge or develop new content.

An interesting contribution from the lecturer facilitating Environmental Design was that the current curriculum in that field is providing the elementary knowledge and practice of environmental and interior design but it is missing a significant element. The lecturer suggested that beyond the classroom knowledge of landscape and interior design, students should also have physical practical experience of working in a construction site, both public and residential. It was concluded that two new modules will be developed in this regard, Landscape Construction and Renovation and Interior Construction and Renovation.

Furthermore, the Quality Assurance evaluations revealed that the students commitment decrease as they reach 4th year. The problem identified is that perhaps the timetable from 1st to 3rd has compulsory modules to be attended and proceeding to the next level is dependent on full attendance and completion of projects.

However, due to the nature of the 4th year curriculum, students tend to not manage their time favourably and complete their research project requirements in the last minute. No resolutions have been reached on this matter but a research team has been selected to deliberate on this matter and come up with possible solutions.

In conclusion, this paper has reported on the outcomes of quality assurance interviews, which has helped to solve some issues and also highlight areas that need attention and intervention. The quality assurance interviews and evaluations have played a significant role in improving student experience, learning achievement and the growth of the department towards excellence.

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