

University Quality Assurance in Zimbabwe: A Case of Solusi University

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Abstract: Holistic education molds the head, the hand and the heart of a learner at all levels of education. Quality assurance has become an essential part of these academic core-value systems in institutions of higher learning, particularly, universities. This research focused on general quality; quality control, quality assurance and academic standards at Solusi University. The research took a library and computer based approach where information was gathered mainly from official documents. The researcher also got some information through observation. Collected data was analyzed qualitatively and the following themes emerged: assuring quality requires effort from all university workers and Solusi University has managed it; Solusi University controls quality through assessing the following: students entry requirements, programs, facilities, activities, faculty and feedback from stake holders; Quality is assured by Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) and Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA). The study concluded that Solusi University has high academic standard that are abreast with global university expectations; although Solusi University has high quality, it has a number of areas that can still be improved.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Quality Control, Academic Standards

1. Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education, specifically at the university, has become essential with the expansion of the higher education sector. Quality Assurance Directorate (2015) defined quality assurance as a measure of the value of what we do and the system of benchmarks which we use to ensure that academic business (teaching and learning, research, and community service) is of the expected standard and is maintained and improved on a continuous basis. On a similar note, Van Dame (2011) argued that quality has become an integral part of the academic core-value system in universities which was unfortunately absent in the past. It was necessitated by lack of standard and self-regulation quality in universities.

Today, with the globalization of education, quality assurance has become inevitable. Jung (undated) propounded:

Until recently they (universities) placed more emphasis on widening access than assuring quality, but now they recognize quality assurance as a key issue that needs to be addressed not only within individual universities but also jointly and in the global context. (p.79)

The above quotation shows that the paradigm shift in education is towards quality. Handbook on Processes for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Kenya, (2008) highlighted that the rapid expansion of higher education, entrance of market forces in higher education delivery and globalization of education gave rise to the formation of structures and mechanisms, standards and guidelines to assure quality. An example is the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) which was created as a body corporate in 1985 by an Act of Parliament to make better provisions for the advancement of university education in Kenya and for connected purposes. Also, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) which is a strategic institution of the East African Community (EAC) and is responsible for the development and coordination of higher education and research in the region, that is, East Africa.

Policy framework for university education in Kenya (2012) highlighted that quality and relevant university education must meet the needs of both the learner and the society. By having such a structure, policy framework for university education, the government of Kenya's over-arching goal is to have sustainable quality university education for national development.

The word *quality* brings up the idea of perfection, superior, excellence and value which is difficulty to attain. This means that, if it is attained, it is due to diligence, thoroughness and persistence by the groups of people concerned. Assurance means guarantee under a Quality Assurance Officer (QAO), that is a person who is in charge of seeing to it that standards are maintained. Such a person is entrusted by the university to monitor and advice on issues of quality of the university. In some universities s/he is known as Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or Quality Assurance Personnel (QAP).

Quality assurance can be divided into two categories: the external and the internal. The one that is handled by a person in a university is the internal quality assurance. In essence, the internal quality assurance status should be decided by the university and should focus primarily on expectations associated with teaching, learning and assessment activities; this is usually reflected in the mission statement. However, in reality, internal quality assurance is affected by external factors which make quality in universities very complicated and intricate but at the same time, assured.

Below is a diagram that tries to explain factors that control and shape internal quality assurance.

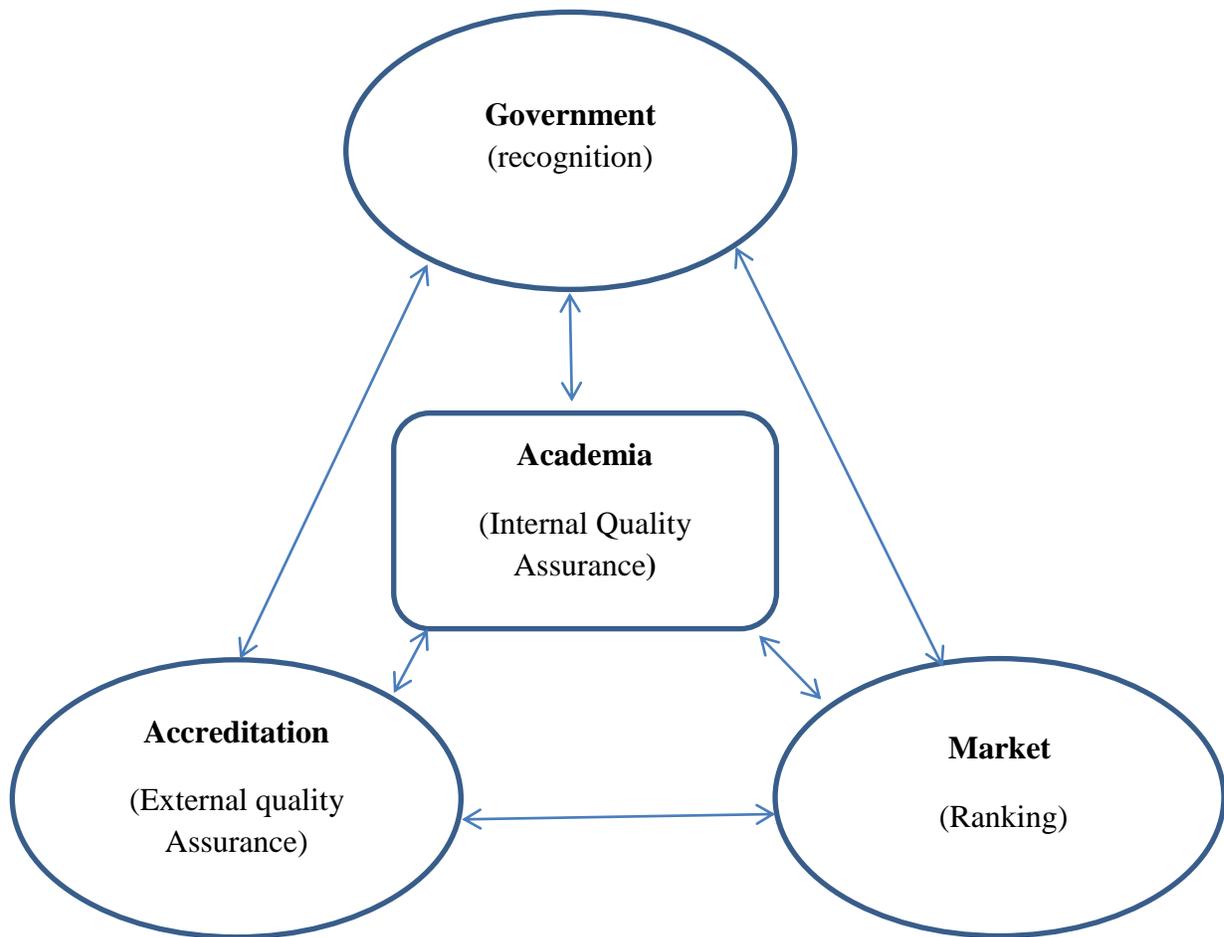


Figure 1: Factors (and relationships) affecting internal quality assurance

Source: Own Diagram

The diagram above shows that internal quality assurance is mainly affected by three factors, that is, the government, the market nature and the external quality assurance. The government prescribes how the universities of a country are run (if they are public universities) and grants a charter (if they are private university that meets the government standards). In response, the university adheres to the government requirements. This relationship is shown on the diagram by a double pointed arrow that connects the government and the internal quality assurance.

Again, from the market point of view, internal high quality, that which is abreast with the national and international standards, is desirable. The diagram has double arrows linking the internal quality assurance and the market to show that relationship. The market is also affected by the nature of the government, that is, its social, political and economic status while the market can also influence the government, hence another double arrowed linking the two.

Internal quality assurance is heavily influenced and controlled by the external quality assurance especially through accreditation. At the same time, the operation of the external quality assurance is also

affected by the standard of the internal quality assurance, therefore, a double line joining the two and thus the intricate relationship.

The relationships on the diagram above show that the academia (which is associated with internal quality assurance) is not independent when setting its standards. Every university has a culture that is usually set by other significant parties of the universities, for example, the church, in the case of private church universities. Mother churches have the power to dictate degrees to be offered which may or may not tally with the demands of the market and the external quality assurance. This becomes a problem to the university. Ramirez (2013) argued that such socially-embedded stakeholder interests can both enhance as well as constrain quality assurance processes in an institution. Apart from the church, other partners like funding agencies, the government, the business sector, research councils, foundations, charities and professional bodies can also influence the operation of a university.

Although the internal quality assurance is affected and influenced by external factor, it is imperative that each university find its own way of harmonizing the demands and finally come up with a written document elaborating its quality. The main issue is to develop a quality assurance system which is effective in terms of maintaining high standards and improving institutional performance. Elsewhere in the world, the University of Cambridge (2015) has the following as some of the university's quality assurance focus:

- the University's nature as a community of scholars
- the conviction that academic staff and students are most effective in an environment that is supportive and participative rather than directive and managerial
- a proportionate central approach to potential risk to learning and teaching provision and to assessment
- the General Board's Learning and Teaching Strategy

In Zimbabwe, Quality Assurance Directorate (2015) shows the quality assurance for the University of Zimbabwe whose purpose is systematic monitoring and evaluation to ensure that standards are being met. Some of its functions are given below:

- provides leadership for quality assurance and good practice in the university
- monitors implementation of quality assurance policies in the university
- monitors achievement of set benchmarks to provide useful feedback to faculties
- advises Senate on how the system is performing with regards to quality and suggests improvements
- ensures that programs comply with Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) guidelines
- analyses student evaluation data and generates reports for both quality and management purposes.

It can be argued that Quality Assurance is a very important and essential standard part of a university. As Solusi University Quality Assurance Officer wrote to the university community when going for 2015 Christmas holiday, *“Please note that Deans, Heads of Departments/Units are in charge of quality in*

their spheres of operation. However, assuring quality is the responsibility of every member of the university"; indeed, assuring quality at a university requires effort from all. This research wanted to find out the state of quality assurance at Solusi University, Zimbabwe answering the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of quality at Solusi University?
2. To what extent is quality control achieved at Solusi University?
3. Which level of quality assurance has Solusi University reached?
4. How are academic standards at Solusi University rated?

2. Material and Methods

The research employed a descriptive research design. The research took a library and computer based approach where the researcher gathered information mainly from hard-copy and internet documentations. A seven-step qualitative data analysis process began with (a) collecting related data, (b) organizing and preparing data for analysis, (c) studying the data, (d) coding the data, (e) identifying patterns and themes, (g) interrelating patterns and themes, and (h) interpreting the data. The researcher also got some information through observation. Findings were compressed into a coherent descriptive research report.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Quality of Solusi University

According to the American Society for Quality, quality is defined as the totality of features and the characteristics of a product or service that bears on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs (Heizer 2008). Handbook on Processes for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Kenya, (2008) explained that quality in higher education is perceived as consisting of a synthesis of conformity, adaptability and continuous improvement and is often defined as “fitness for purpose” and also “standard – based”. Based on the two definitions, when considering the quality of Solusi as a university, one looks at the services it offers, that is the academic quality, as well as the satisfaction of the significant parties (the student, the parent, the government and the market).

One can argue that Solusi University is of high quality, first and foremost, by considering its mission. The mission and philosophy of Solusi University are consistent with the advancement of education, promoting research and involvement in community activities in response to community needs (Solu University 2015). It aims at provide quality holistic Christian education at undergraduate and graduate levels primarily for the Seventh- Day Adventist constituency in Zimbabwe Union Conference and other entities who meet the educational and character standards established by the Council.

The vision of the university is also associated with quality:

- to reposition the institution into a world-class Christian Centre of learning
- to develop state-of-the-art facilities in keeping with the Solusi Charter of 1994
- to comply with the Adventist philosophy of education and full realization of institutional mandate

- to realign methods, tools and approaches to the rapidly shifting demands of an ever-dynamic job-market and finally
- to reduce the cost of education at Solusi University.
- The vision revolves around the following focus areas:
 - modernized instructional methods
 - human resource empowerment
 - accountability and sustainability
 - student comfort and satisfaction
 - aesthetic and friendly environment
 - administrative efficiency

In order to improve quality, the University is also in partnership with other organizations, namely: SDA General Conference, Southern-Africa Indian Ocean Division, Adventist Relief Agency, Loma Linda University, Andrews University and Zimbabwe Union Conference (Solusi University 2015).

It should be noted that one cannot only base a quality of a university on the paper documents; these are only plans and one can question on how far these aspects are implemented, for it is in the implementation that quality can be measured. In practice, Solusi University can be said to have quality for it was among the top ten universities in Zimbabwe, it was at number 8 according to 2015 ranking (University Web Ranking 2015). Again, Solusi University encourages involvement of its faculty members in research activities at individual, joint and collaborative levels through the University's Office of Research Information & Publication and through linkages with various University departments, other educational institutions and organizations. It has a successful biannual (June and December) academic journal publication.

However, the university has limited programs; it has only five faculties, namely: Faculty of Arts, Theology, Business, Science and Technology and Education. The university has also very limited Graduate programs and is trying to establish more programs at this level. Areas like Engineering, Medicine and Geology, among others, therefore become the preserve of well-established state universities such as the University of Zimbabwe and National University of Science and Technology (NUST) as Chivore (2006) argued.

Again, Solusi is still offering General degrees at undergraduate level, although it is pushing for Honors degrees; the proposals have already been approved by Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) but not yet approved by ZIMCHE. It can be said that although Solusi University is putting effort in having academic quality, it has a number of areas where quality can be improved.

3.2 Quality Control at Solusi University

The term quality control refers to the technique of ensuring compliance with the set standards and procedures of an organization. Business dictionary (2015) defined quality control as an aspect of the quality assurance process that consists of activities employed in detection and measurement of the variability in the characteristics of output attributable to the production system, and includes corrective

responses. In other words, these activities are operational techniques that are used to fulfil requirements for quality.

To this effect, quality control is closely linked to self- assessment, that is, an assessment conducted by the institution to find out whether programs meet, and continuously meet, their educational objectives and outcomes with the purpose of improve program's quality and enhancing students learning. Seletso (2012) highlighted that the internal self-evaluation ensures that the students acquire quality academic programs. In order to control quality, an institution needs to be proactive rather than reactive. This can be achieved by initiating improvements wherever and whenever need arises so as to achieve academic excellence. At Solusi University, this self-assessment follows the ZIMCHE parameters and is done in the following areas:

- Students
- Curriculum
- Programs
- Facilities
- Buildings
- Teaching
- Faculty

At the University, lecturers are assigned course units according to their areas of expertise. The Quality Assurance Office see to it that lecturers' qualifications are aligned, for instance, a Linguistics lecturer should have done Linguistics at all levels of study. If there is a miss-match at some level, realignment should be done. Currently, there are a number of Solusi lecturers who are aligning their qualifications. Then comes academic advancement by lecturers; the university is very supportive to lecturers who are advancing themselves.

Feedback from the stakeholders on programs and how they are run is a very essential tool in quality control. When Solusi students go on industrial attachment, Solusi gets feedback and act on it. An example is that, the university was criticized for too little time for the industrial attachment; the industry argued that when students are beginning to grasp some concepts, their attachment period finishes. Currently, attachment period has been increase to a full year. Another key on quality control at Solusi University is the university entrance requirements which include passing of English Language and Mathematics at Ordinary Level. Awoniyi and Awoniyi (2014) made a research on performance of students in the faculty of Business programs in relation to Ordinary Level Mathematics pass. From the findings of the study, it was evident that Ordinary Level Mathematics is a predictor of academic success in the faculty of Business programs. This is in line with the requirement of Solusi University that any student wishing to enter for Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) program should present an Ordinary Level credit in Mathematics. The findings show that Solusi University is managing to control quality through assessing students' entry requirements, programs, facilities, activities, faculty and feedback from stake holders.

3.3 Quality Assurance at Solusi University

Solusi University was graded a Charter in 1994 by the Zimbabwean government. This therefore means that it passed the government requirements for private university operation in Zimbabwe. However, the question that can be raised now is whether Solusi has maintained that standard or even improved. One can argue that although Solusi University is facing some challenges, at least, it is operating at the required quality, lest it could have been closed especially by its two prominent external “watch dogs”, that is, the ZMCHE and the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) accreditation boards.

Khatri and Sharma (2011) identified the following groups of people who need to be assured of the quality of a university: the students, who are the primary beneficiary; the parents, who are the sponsors; the government, which is concerned on whether the services from these institutions meet the national development agenda and finally, the employers, who are mainly consumers of the skills acquired from the universities (they are interested in the qualifications of the graduates entering the job market).

Garwe (Undated) acknowledged that there is clearly a shift in terms of national quality assurance policy in Zimbabwe, from an internal system where universities used to rely on self-accreditation and self-evaluation to a more integrated system with an external dimension since the new quality assurance system is regulated by the ZCHE and requires institutions to be accountable to it.

The mandate of ZIMCHE is “*to promote and coordinate education provided by institutions of higher education and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education*” (ZIMCHE Act, 2006).

Among its five special committees, ZIMCHE has Higher Education Quality Assurance Committee and its core activity is to guarantee and sustain quality in university education through registrations, audits (academic and Institutional Audits) and accreditation (institutional and program accreditation) of all higher education institutions and their programs/courses.

According to Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Assessment (2015), ZIMCHE works closely with all university leaders, Solusi included, to make sure that they make quality their primary concern. The expectations of ZIMCHE when looking at the duties of Vice Chancellors are that the Vice Chancellor is the chief quality assurance officer of the university as a gatekeeper of standards at the institution and should critically look at and act decisively on all variables that affect quality including the human resources variable, the programs, the facilities, the equipment and other areas of university concern.

It is the Vice Chancellor who informs ZIMCHE of the decisions that were made by the university to assure quality. It should be noted that the Vice Chancellor work in collaboration with the Quality Assurance Personnel (QAP). Each semester, the Vice Chancellor should submit the following information to ZIMCHE:

- Staff levels in institutions
- Qualifications of staff teaching at various levels
- Enrolment statistics per program

- Facilities available for use by students including lecture rooms, library facilities, hostels and recreational facilities
- Special facilities and equipment that promote academic excellence

Any program that does not meet quality standards is suspended and any university that does not meet minimum standard is closed. ZIMCHE Section 6 (d) elaborate on the function of Council, which is to design and recommend an institutional quality assurance system for higher education, that is, a system whereby the courses, programs and degrees offered by institutions are evaluated on a regular and objective basis, and to recommend to the Minister institutional (Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education Assessment 2015) .

Then there is the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) the denominational accrediting authority for all tertiary and graduate educational programs and institutions owned by Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) entities. It is responsible for evaluating the quality of the denominational institutions' programs and their implementation of the SDA philosophy of education in order to foster the unity and mission of the church (Adventist Accrediting Association AAA - Higher Education 2015). Above findings show that there is Quality Assurance at Solusi University; it is mainly a product of ZIMCHE and AAA standards and monitoring.

3.4 Academic Standards at Solusi University

Academic standards are the benchmarks of quality and excellence of a university measured by the nature of the curriculum and level of examination difficulty. Solusi university value the highest academic and professional standards and aim to be internationally recognized for the quality of the University's teaching, learning facilities and educational experience offered to students (Sulusi University 2015).

The university has academic standards advisors who help students to interpret academic policies as they stipulated in the students' handbook and the academic bulletin. Academic standards advisors also act as consultants to faculty and staff.

To maintain academic standards and determine eligibility for continued enrollment, Solusi University regularly reviews the academic records of all undergraduate students. These reviews are done by the Solusi Academic Standards Board (SASB) and it focuses on the quality of the student's performance as measured by the student's course grades. They meet at the end of every semester and review records of students so as to determine their academic status.

The SABS has the mandate to place low performing students under probation according to policy. The board also issues warnings to students according to their academic behavior and performance. A student in good academic good standing is allowed to take a full load of 18 credits for a semester while those on academic probation a required to take only 12 credits per semester.

Sulusi University academic course outlines also stipulate the required academic standards for each course of study. They show expectations on class attendance. All students are expected to attend all classes and are also expected to participation in class activities. Students who can be absent for several days because of genuine reasons, like illness, should notify their Head of Department or Dean on time. A prolonged absence may compel the student to withdrawal from the University for that semester.

As the findings expose in terms of academic standards, Solusi University has a high standard that abreast with global university expectations. From the researcher's observation, this could have been achieved because of manageable student numbers (less than one thousand at the main campus).

It can be concluded that assuring quality requires effort from all university workers and Solusi University has managed it. Solusi University controls quality through assessing the students' entry requirements, programs, facilities, activities, faculty and feedback from stake holders. The university's Quality is assurance by Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) and Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA). Again, Solusi University has high academic standard that are abreast with global university expectations. However, although Solusi University has high quality, it has a number of areas that can be improved. Since this study is just a case study, it recommends a broader investigation into the issue of university quality assurance in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the world so that the issue is more understood for university development.

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