



## The influence of learner attitude on the management and provision of quality knowledge and skills in higher education institutions (HEIs)

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**Abstract:** This paper sought to establish the influence that learners' attitude have on quality of knowledge and skills obtained from higher education institutions particularly in this era characterized by an upsurge of online education. Literature review to examine the scope of quality assurance processes in HEIs was undertaken. Structured questionnaires obtained qualitative data from managers of 15 random centers that provide private tuition and 150 learners. An in-depth interview with the tutors and learners at these private tuition centers supported the qualitative data. The data was interrogated using parametric statistical analysis. The study found that Majority of the centers who provided private remedial tuition for specific courses also provided solicited assistance to learners with the writing of assignment reports required as a partial fulfillment of the various learners' study programmes. The learners justified this disposition on pressure of time and excessive demand from the educational institutions and consequent focus on certification.

**Key words** – Higher education, Tertiary education, learners, quality assurance, Quality management

### 1.0. Introduction and background

Higher education is an entitlement to those who qualify for it. Society supports the establishment of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from which to draw work force to manage institutions that govern society. Society inevitably looks upon the HEIs to produce new knowledge and techniques to manage the dynamic environment that is characterized by new challenges and problems that governments and people face. HEIs are mandated to assist learners in mastering knowledge, values, abilities and mind-set to confront new facts and find creative ways to solve emergent problems. The learners who obtain HEIs' certificate at the end of the study programme must demonstrate possession of the power to read and do all that appertains to that qualification. It is in pursuit of the

foregoing that the HEI sector focuses on a rigorous quality assurance system that is cognizant of the various comprehensive contributory factors (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis and Fitsilis, 2010)

Quality is a terminological concept that was brought into prominence by the 'gurus' of quality; Juran (1904), Fergenbaum (1968) and Deming (1985) with the advent of the twentieth century. The concept has been mainly associated with the manufacturing, distribution and selling of tangible products. Quality has been variously defined as; a high degree of goodness (Proctor, 1978); doing the right things right (Deming, 1998); degree of 'fit' between what a customer wants and what a customer receives (Peninsula Technikon, 2001). However, the Chartered Quality institute (CQI) defines quality as a characteristic of a product or service provided to a customer and the



hallmark of an organization that satisfy v. all of its stakeholders ([www.thecqi.org](http://www.thecqi.org), 2015). In the tangible products sector, vi. the consumer of the products determines the level of quality. Under thesevii. circumstances, the level of quality is perceived and defined based on five majorviii. dimensions; transcendent – concepts of beauty and love; product-based – ix. referring to product attributes; user-based – focusing on customer satisfaction; manufacturing-based – conformance to requirements and specifications and value-based- focusing on costs (Garvin, 1998, cited by Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi and Leitner, 2004). Quality is a complex phenomenon that requires an interface of internal conformance and external value addition management. However, modern tangible product sector has adopted the definition of user-based due to the competitive advantages associated with customer-centric business marketing operations as postulated by Gandhi (1890) during his crusade against violence and living a simple life.

If quality perspectives from the tangible product view were a complex phenomenon, then the intangible or services sector that includes education services that are often intangible and difficult to measure, would present an analogy that is more inconceivable. The situation is exacerbated by the inseparability of the customer in service quality determination. Nevertheless, in the pursuit of developing conceptual model of service quality, Parasuraman et al. (1985), proposed 10 dimensions of service quality;

- i. Reliability- provided as promised
- ii. Responsiveness – prompt action
- iii. Competence- possession of knowledge and skills
- iv. Access- available when required

- Courtesy- politeness, friendly and respect
- Communication- provide understandable information
- Credibility- trustworthiness and honesty of service provider
- Security- freedom from any danger or doubt
- Understanding the customer- researches the needs and wants of customers
- Tangibles- facilities and equipment

The aforementioned 10 dimensions of services quality were later viewed as inadequate in favour of what was perceived to be seven valuable conceptual understanding of services (Gronoroo, 2000). These seven conceptual understanding incorporated the situational effects, focusing on;

- i. Professionalism and skills – knowledge and skills to solve a customer’s concern;
- ii. Attitudes and behaviour – demonstrated concern for customers’ issues;
- iii. Accessibility and flexibility – ability to obtain the service by reaching the provider;
- iv. Reliability and trustworthiness – ability to actionalize promises;
- v. Service recovery – finding acceptable solutions to replace wrong services;
- vi. Serviscape – positive experience generated by physical environment; and
- vii. Reputation and credibility – an able service provider capable of being trusted and provide value for money.

There have been an avalanche of studies conducted by various researchers on service quality but they essentially seem to emphasize the technical



- quality outcome of a service delivery and the functional quality of the service delivery process. However, other studies have identified 5 common and simplified dimensions used by consumers in evaluating service quality (Tsinidou, Gerogianis and Fitsilis, 2010; and Berndt and Tait, 2015);
- i. Reliability- ability to perform the promised service and deliver the promises dependably and accurately;
  - ii. Responsiveness – willingness to help customers with prompt service;
  - iii. Assurance – employees ability to exude trust and confidence based on their knowledge and courtesy;
  - iv. Empathy – caring and individualized attention provided to customers based on their uniqueness; and
  - v. Tangibles – referring to the enhancement provided by physical facilities.
- 1.1 Quality Dimensions in Higher Education**
- Quality is an old concept within HEIs, dating back to the 1980s (Elassy, 2015) with some researchers like Berger and Blanco-Ramirez (2014), proposing an integrative model that includes investment, access and relevance. Quality in education has been defined in various ways; conformance to standards (Green, 1994); good enough practice (Gibbs, 2011); effectiveness in achieving institutional goals (Green, 1994); meeting customers stated needs (Morley, 2003). There are two broad levels of customers in HEIs. These form the ultimate consumers. The first level is the learner and the second level is the society, represented by industry. It is necessary to manage quality in HEIs at these two levels if holistic quality assurance and enhancement is to form a permanent feature in HEIs. Currently there seems to be little focus on the second level of consumer. This drives to the assertion that quality learning should advertently focus on meaning not on memorizing and reproduction. Nevertheless, Harvey and Green (1993) propose 5 interrelated dimensions of quality worth focusing on in higher education;
- i. Exceptional – exceeding high standards (current and prospective students);
  - ii. Perfection or consistency – referring to zero defects ( employees meet the behavioural norms of the sector);
  - iii. Fitness for purpose – meeting customer requirements (employers);
  - iv. Value for money – directly related to costs (funding bodies and communities);
  - v. Transformation – create qualitative change through enhancement and empowerment

These 5 dimensions of quality in higher education remain current and relevant. It is logical that the process of accreditation, which manages quality in HEIs directly or indirectly, captures these dimensions, which provide the hallmark of society expectations. It is therefore not surprising that the Commission for University Education in Kenya has embarked on an audit exercise aimed at regularizing qualifications obtained from HEIs (2017)

**1.2 Quality Assurance Process in HEIs**

*Quality assurance in HEIs is a rigorous process that starts with curriculum*



*development. Curriculum is a terminology used in the process of designing a study programme that has many definitions. Anything taught is curriculum (Kagan, 2002). Moore (2004) proposes the term to be not only a preserve of educational circles where it refers to learning lessons in school classrooms but include learning processes in workplaces. Bunyi (2013) and Li Wang (2014) share the argument that curriculum should refer to formal and informal content and processes through which learners gain knowledge, develop skills, acquire appropriate attitudes and values that are directed towards achieving the goals and objectives of an educational programme. This culminates in the terminology being a preserve of the lessons and academic content taught in a school or in a specific course/module or program. A curriculum, among other influencers therefore, has an exceptional contribution to the foundation for the required learner experiences that occur during the learning process. Therefore, the desired quality education sourced from institutions of higher learning starts with the process that establishes the curriculum, commonly referred to as curriculum development. Curriculum development includes a variety of activities around the creation of planned curriculum, pedagogy, instruction, and delivery methods for guiding student learning.*

### **1.3 Quality assurance and accreditation of HEIs**

Accreditation is the process that awards a [certification](#) of competency, authority, or credibility to an entity or process. Accreditation is a practice that is highly recognized in the field of education. Institutions that mainly provide higher education undergo validation through

accreditation. Peer review boards whose membership is from various accredited institutions that provide higher education establish the standards that apply for accrediting. The peer review board therefore, provides an evaluation of each potential new institution with accreditation or renewals of previous accreditation. The standards set revolve a criterion that encompasses;

- The mission of the institution
- Objectives and goals of the institution/faculty
- Learner requirements for admissions
- Services available to learners
- Quality of education
- Reputation of institution/faculty

The process of accreditation, though multistage is periodical and therefore considered determinate (Bornman, Mittag and Daniel, 2006). It is not necessarily cyclic and continuous. Continued provision of an acceptable level of quality of education by the accredited institutions of higher learning depends on management and professional goodwill of the facilitators. This is not surprising because studies carried out by Manyaga (2007) conclude that a consistent use of accreditation standards is useful but inadequate since quality in tertiary institutions is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon (Doherty, 2008) that requires participation of the entire stakeholder community. Even in distance education systems quality has been restricted to; online curriculum policies and framework, faculty support, student support, course design and course delivery (Southard and Mooney, 2015). The scope of accreditation inevitably involves the development of a curriculum



and revolves around learner-centeredness focusing on providing the highest quality learner experience.

#### 1.4 Provision and management of quality education by HEIs

Quality assurance (QA) in the manufacturing sector provides a methodology of preventing mistakes or defects in the learning process and avoiding problems when delivering solutions or services to customers ([www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com) 2015). It widely involves seven frameworks;

- i. Determining [adequate technical](#) requirement of inputs and [outputs](#);
- ii. [Certificating](#) and [rating](#) of [suppliers](#);
- iii. [Testing](#) of procured [material](#) for its [conformance](#) to [established quality, performance, safety,](#) and [reliability](#) standards;
- iv. Proper [receiving, storage,](#) and [issue](#) of material,
- v. [Auditing](#) of the [process](#) quality,
- vi. [Evaluating](#) the process to establish [required](#) corrective [response](#); and
- vii. Conformance of final output by auditing; (a) technical; (b) reliability; (c) [maintainability](#); and (d) performance [requirements](#).

Studies abound on the systematic introduction of QA in education forcing the HEIs to define their SMART objectives and to involve society in the assessment of their performance. In that respect quality assurance leads to identity and branding of each HEI. Quality assurance that is nexus to accreditation in HEIs follows stage i-vi. Stage vii, that is quite critical in the provision of quality education, seems largely ignored except as far as the learners' evaluation of teaching (LET)

dictates (Fan and Dunrong, 2009). There is no doubt that LET improves the teaching quality assurance system in HEIs. However, extant studies (Southard and Mooney, 2015, Ajmal, Razzaq, Rahman, Jumani and Chisti, 2010, Doherty, 2008) indicate that QA in education does not focus on the learners' societal performance as implied in stage vii. Currently quality assessment in HEIs is based on; academic staff, administration services, library services, curriculum structure, location, infrastructure and career prospects (Tsinidou, Gerogianis and Fitsilis, 2010). The proliferation of online education, whose quality dimensions focuses on; programme goals and objectives, content authoring, courseware development, adjunct faculty recruitment, pedagogy and delivery (Lam and Chua, 2007) has exacerbated the problem. There are also arguments on the obsolescence of performance indicators just like most research data.

Studies are abound on the systematic introduction of QA and formulation of SMART objectives in HEIs leading to identity and branding to gain competitive advantage at market place and space. HEIs are therefore observed exhibiting competition at the marketplace (George, 2006). All stakeholders in HEIs are not immune to the dynamic environment in which they operate. Scarce resources have built pressure resulting in deviation from the traditional roles of HEIs (Mapesela and Hay, 2006) and staffs and students have succumbed to pursuing the mission of higher education. Nonetheless, focus should be on efficiency, effectiveness and societal economic growth.

The foregoing indicates that insurmountable research on QA processes and managing quality in HEIs





has been done. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence adducible from this literature review that no research has been done on the influence of the learners themselves in providing quality education hence knowledge and skills. There have been heterogeneous public complaints about the inadequacies and readiness for the industry (society) of graduates of HEIs in some countries (World Bank, 2015; Jaschik, 2015; Schomaker, 2013; Lowden, Hall, Elliot and Lewin, 2011; Gudo, Olel and Oanda, 2011; Tomlison, 2012).

### 2.0. Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study were to;

- i. Re-establish the framework for quality assurance in higher education institutions
- ii. Asses the requirements for provision of holistic QA
- iii. Identify problems in providing holistic QA
- iv. Make proposals on a formidable holistic QA system

### 3.0 Research methodology/philosophy/approach/instrumentation and strategy

The study employed an interpretivism philosophy with an abductive approach. Semi-structured, self-administered questionnaires collected qualitative data from 15 private tuition centers / private tuition providers and 150 learners who sort assistance at these centers. The study lasted over a 2-year period with 12 months interval as a test-retest measure to ensure a higher level of reliability. Telephone interviews with familiar contacts in the United Kingdom (UK), East Africa (Kenya) and United States of America (USA) augmented the data.

The respondents answered the questionnaires without any pressure to do so. They were adequately debriefed and the researcher maintained the highest level of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the study.

### 3.1 Findings

Over the two years, it was consistently found that of the 15 private tuition centers, 13 (86.7%) stated that their main stream of income is providing students of HEIs with the direct assistance of designing and writing their various assignments (coursework, projects and research reports). Only a pastry average of 2 (13.3%) private tuition centers denied their involvement in directly assisting students of HEIs with assignments.

During the first year, of the 150 HEI students, 90 (60%), of them indicated that they directly sort the services of private tuition centers for writing their assignments, while 60 (40%) of them denied ever getting involved. The 40% explained the services sought as consultation for academic guidance on writing winning assignments. The second year recorded 123 (82%) HEI students stating that they sought direct assistance in designing and writing assignments while 27 (18%) denied the involvement. Majority of the students who plagiarized in these assignments had some categorical thematic reasons. The reasons included; "I don't have enough time to do all assignments since I am required to submit all assignments at end of semester; I don't quite understand when the teachers are explaining in some subjects; Why should I struggle when I can get it easier; All I need is a certificate to show my prospective employer".



#### 4.0. Discussion, conclusion and recommendation

Certain minimum admission requirements are a prerequisite for functioning HEIs. However, there are inherent differences on learners based on; differences among educational institutions at pre-tertiary levels, socio-economic segregation and gender inequality (Michaelowa, 2007). The expectation is that they are quality graduates, expected to offer solutions to continuing global challenges. This assertion emanates from exposure to appropriate learning processes at HEIs. Unfortunately, there is a contrary observation with some of the graduates. As already stated the current QA systems for HEIs focuses on; academic staff, methodology, administration services, library services, curriculum structure, location, infrastructure and career prospects (Tsinidou, Gerogianis and Fitsilis, 2010) but does not consider the role played by the learners. Though there are exceptions, the current QA management system in HEIs has gaps. The gaps emanate from the failure to consider the contributions made by learners towards a formidable QA system. The expectation is that all graduates from HEIs possess required education as evidenced by certification. The assumption is that these graduates are capable of developing appropriate workplace competencies and skills in their professional areas as demanded by society. Such graduates are 'fit for purpose' and 'right first time'. They are an asset and ready to provide solutions to the continuous challenges facing society. However, a portion of learners at HEIs who engage themselves in plagiarism practices, present a mismatch of knowledge and skills in terms of job environmental demands. Such are

inevitably a source of the societal complaints of HIEs, viewed as producing human capital that fall below the expected performance levels as measured by society represented by industry. These inadequately prepared graduates will always prefer routine tasks and are unable to claim an effective contribution to growth of national and global economies.

The revelations made by the study will continue unabated if remedial measures are not urgently put in place. The following are proposed intervention measures to reverse the current QA system management in HEIs;

- i. Considerations should be made such that the internal and external accreditation and consequently QA process is continuous or cyclic. This offers an opportunity to mitigate against any unexpected drop in set standards.
- ii. Pedagogical practices that focus on inclusivity should be encouraged by lecturers. This will eliminate the situation where learners find themselves wanting in terms of expectant knowledge to accomplish their assignments.
- iii. Coursework are important in imparting knowledge. When delayed to the end of the semester or year, work overload may persuade the learners to engage themselves in plagiarism practices as alluded to in this study.
- iv. When coursework or report submission is brought reasonably forward within the semester or year, interviews or examination based on the coursework or report submitted for evaluation can be arranged and executed by the lecturers. The level of performance will confirm that the learner is privy to the information contained in the report. This practice has been confirmed effective in dissertation / thesis defense process.



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