Perceived Impact of External Quality Assurance on Public and Private Higher Education Institutions in Namibia

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Abstract: The increasing demand for higher education in Namibia has led to the setting up of mechanisms to provide public assurances about the quality of higher education. Government and Higher Education Institutions (GHEIs) make significant investments to implement quality assurance mechanisms be these internal or external to the Public and Private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs).

The majority of the stakeholders agree that External Quality Assurance (EQA) enhances acceptability of quality statements, but there seems to be no empirical evidence to this effect. There is, therefore, a need to assess the usefulness and benefits of EQA on private HEIs in Namibia. The aim of this study will therefore be to assess the impact of EQA on public and private higher education institutions (PPHEIs) in Namibia.

External Quality Assurance (EQA) is becoming an important aspect of Higher Education Institutions(HEIs) in both developed and developing countries as reflected in the development of policies, structures, and systems at national and HEIs levels(NQA 2011:12).This descriptive case study investigated the impact of External Quality Assurance in the Public and private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs) in Namibia. To accomplish the stated objectives above, the inputs, process, and output model was used as the basis of this study and the descriptive survey method approach was adopted for the collection of the data. The researchers adopted a concurrent mixed methods research design to collect both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time. Seven out of ten fully accredited public and private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs) participated in this study. Twenty questionnaires that consisted of both open-ended and closed items were distributed among the ten PPHEIs. Fourteen questionnaires from seven PPHEIs representing a response rate of 70% were completed and returned to the researcher. The literature review focused on the impact of quality assurance in PPHEIS.

On the whole, the PPHEIs were aware of the concept of NQA external quality assurance with regards to the processes and role as well as its strengths. The EQA also had more than moderate impacts on PPHEIs' governance, strategic planning, teaching and learning as well as administrative and support services.

The findings of NQA external quality Assurance on the PPHEIs in Namibia were mixed due to the fact that this was the first EQA carried out on PPHEIs where each institution was held accountable to maintain a high standard of institutional quality.

In sum, the PPHEIs have acquired the essence of quality requirements as each PPHEI subjected itself to the EQA conducted by NQA. Similarly, the EQA had made moderate impact on the PPHEIs' governance and strategic planning, teaching and learning as well as physical development of infrastructures and administrative support systems.

The focus of EQA must be more on continuous improvement as well as compliance. All accredited PPHEIs should complete quality improvement plan after the receipt of the EQA report and should submit an annual conformity to the quality report body each year.

Keywords: Accreditation, Assessment, Effectiveness, External Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance policy

Introduction

Education is a national priority of any country including Namibia. Namibia has a historical background of colonialism associated with segregation, denial, and apartheid policies. The interests of the colonial masters appeared to be more on resource exploitation (natural, human and economic) with little consideration of the human capacity development in terms of education, skills development and professionalism. As a result, Namibia before 1990 had little of tertiary education development characterised with very few vocational institutions without any University. The current major higher learning institutions, namely, Polytechnic of Namibia (Now Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), University of Namibia (UNAM) and the International University of Management (IUM) were established after independence (post 1990). As a young country with high ambitions and aspirations to bridge gaps and shortcomings created by the colonial legacy in terms of education, training and human capacity development, and several educational policies were developed such as "Education for all". The questions to be asked include:

- To what extent and at what stage is Namibia today in terms of tertiary education development?
- How competitive is the Namibian tertiary education in terms of quality?
- What forms of external quality assurance are in place to ensure competitive tertiary education system in Namibia?

In order to answer these questions, this research was meant to evaluate the Impact of External Quality Assurance on Public and Private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs) in Namibia.

Background Information of Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA)

The Namibia Qualification Authority (NQA)   was established by the Namibia Qualifications Acts of 1996 (NQA, 2011:10)The Namibia Qualifications Authority Act 1996 requires the NQA to "set-up and administer a national qualifications framework which is a transformation tool. The NQF describes existing systems in the formal and non-formal education. According to NQA (2011:5) the specific objectives of the NQF are articulation of qualifications, the promotion of consistency among the various qualifications sectors and provision of information regarding various qualifications and how they are aligned in the labour market. This framework also seeks to assure the quality of education and assessment aimed at increasing the reputation of education and training within the country and internationally. The NQA is responsible for the accreditation of Namibia's education public and private providers as well as programmes and the relevant organisational stakeholders aimed at identifying the different education and qualification possibilities in the country with a view to providing information about them. The NQF is a unified, comprehensive, and inclusive framework that includes all qualifications from primary school touniversity level.

Problem Statement

 The increasing demand for higher education in Namibia has led to the setting up of mechanisms to provide public assurances about the quality of higher education. Government and Higher Education Institutions (GHEIs) make significant investments to implement quality assurance mechanisms be these internal or external to the Public and Private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs). The Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) was established with the mandate to provide such information. The majority of the stakeholders agree that External Quality Assurance (EQA) enhances acceptability of quality statements, but there seems to be no empirical evidence to this effect. There is, therefore, a need to assess the usefulness and benefits of EQA on private HEIs in Namibia. The aim of this study will therefore be to assess the impact of EQA on public and private higher education institutions (PPHEIs) in Namibia.

Approximately a decade after the introduction of quality assurance in higher education, it is time to investigate the effect and impact of these systems. The burgeoning higher education sector presents quality assurance challenges. Resources are expended for external reviews and the implementation of recommendations that stem from the review reports. There is little evidence about the actual impact of the Quality Assurance (QA) processes on institutional practice and performance.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

- Explore the potential impact of EQA on PPHEIs in Namibia; and
- Explore the perceptions of the public and private Higher Education Institutions regarding role and strength of Namibian Qualifications Authority'sExternal Quality assurance systems.

Literature Review

The review is informed by Keohane (2006:25) as indicated by the model of inputs, process and outcome (perceived impact) of External quality Assurance on PPHEIs service delivery. In the category of inputs, the Keohane (2006: 25) identified government policy on quality assurance (External Quality Assurance), External operating environment (such as growth in Higher education both locally and internationally, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching and learning), as well as Stakeholder demand for quality (University/Polytechnic/College accountability for public funding, value for money and fulfilment of moral values by University/Polytechnic/College). In the category of process factor, Keohane (2006) identified the following: University/ Polytechnic/ College systems and process to assure quality as well the their governance and strategic planning, infrastructures academic and aligning administrative support services with the core functions of the institutions). In the outcome category, Keohane (2006:25) identified the extent to which a combination of inputs and process inputs added value to the University/ Polytechnic/ College QA of their programmes.

According to Martin and Stella (2007:101), EQA systems tend to fill the gaps in the broader quality assurance system and they focus on functions that are not yet carried out by other agencies. The size of the higher education system is one of the contextual issues that may heavily influence the choices that are made regarding the structure of an EQA. The level of private provision of higher education, the country's level of development, and the public perception of that provision influence the quality assurance arrangement in a country (Martin & Stella 2007:42. The maturity of the system is another factor that determines the role that various stakeholders can play in the quality assurance arrangement. The overall purpose of an EQA system corresponds to a specific approach; whether compulsory, voluntary, fitness for purpose or fitness of purpose. However, it is also common for EQA agencies to emerge as multi-functional systems, embracing new functions such as licensing, institutional audit, and programme accreditation (Martin and Stella 2007:42).

The system of evaluation and improvement is not linear, and there is an interactive process of implementation, which means that policy and requirements are adjusted on the ground and the original intention modified by practitioners. Harvey (2006:288)argues that:

> *"There have been changes, which have coincided with a period of attention to quality issues in higher education and leave it open as to whether quality assurance is responsible, has created an atmosphere in which improvement has been encouraged or simply reflects zeitgeist, brought about by other factors such as massification and consumerism in higher education."*

According to Nyathi and Kadhila. (2011:10),it is expected of all higher education institutions in Namibia to assure their quality, to demonstrate their quality, and to have their quality assessed by outsiders such as professional bodies (where applicable), National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), and Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA). The NCHE was established by the Higher Education Act 2003, No 26 of 2003 and was launched in November 2005 (NCHE, 2009:1). The NCHE in Namibia is responsible for:

- monitoring the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions, and
- accrediting, with the concurrence of the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), programmes of higher education provided at higher education institutions.

The National Council on Higher Education (NCHE)'s quality assurance system functions within the context of the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) and in the context of Vision 2030 (NCHE, 2009:3). The quality assurance system of the NCHE in Namibia consists of two sub-systems, viz. programme accreditation and institutional audits 2030 (NCHE, 2009:3). The quality assurance system was developed against the background of international trends in higher education and the higher education context in Namibia, both at the national and institutional levels.

Shah **(**2011:77**)** maintains that the engagement of academic in quality and improvement will be the key to the success of quality outcomes and academic standards. Shah (2011:215)found that there was limited focus on what was really needed in faculties in terms of inputs to achieve improved outcomes in teaching and learning. In order to achieve maximum academic performance, Shah (2011) argues that stakeholders/academics focus more on resources such as: infrastructures, rewards, professional development and managing academic workloads.

The commitment to quality and improvement is a function of institutional culture and senior management priorities (Shah2011:77). Shah (2011) argues that institutions where senior management is genuinely committed to quality and improvement will witness the improvement performance and engagement of staff at all levels. Shah (2011) contends

that institutions that view quality as bureaucratic and damaging to university autonomy will reject EQA and foster a culture of complacency, with lack of recognition of areas of risks for University. Williams (2009) cited in Shah (2011) argues that quality assurance should be, first and foremost, an integral part of all part of academics' personal professional armoury, the part that allows them a good night's sleep because their courses and teaching are well organised and properly ordered. Supporting Umeozor, S.N. & Emasealu, H. (2016) suggested that institutional leaders such as the senior management group, deans, associate deans, heads of department head of programmes course coordinators and administrative unit heads need to engage with quality and improvement initiatives.

External quality assurance has played a significant role in the quality of education in institutions of higher learning around the world. Shah (2011: 56) using qualitative methods in evaluating the effectiveness of External Quality Audits on 30 Australian Universities found that the external quality assurance resulted in:

- *Self-review and identification of areas needing improvement before the actual audit.*
- *Improved data and information management systems.*
- *The use of quality frameworks in university strategic planning frameworks such as the plans, implement, reviews and improved circle.*
- *Improved governance of universities with a greater role by the academic board of and councils in monitoring quality.*

Supporting Shal (2011) Umeozor and Emasealu (2016); New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) (2016) thatthe role of accreditation is to improve standards and guidelines.

Methodology

The researchers used the quantitative survey design. Surveys are done in order to obtain quantitative information that can be used to describe or explore research topics Maree (2007:152). In the case of this research, quantitative data was obtained to describe and explain the status of phenomenon (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001:602) of the impact of EQA on PPHEIs in Namibia. Leedy and Ormrod (2010:187) also stated that the research survey involves acquiring information about one or more groups of people about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences by asking questions and tabulating answers with the ultimate goal to learn about a large population by surveying a sample of that population. For the purpose of this quantitative research survey, a case study was used that focused on seven PPHEIs in Namibia. Seven out of ten fully accredited public and private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs) participated in this study. Twenty questionnaires that consisted of both open-ended and closed items were distributed among the ten PPHEIs. Fourteen questionnaires from seven PPHEIs representing a response rate of 70% were completed and returned to the researcher. The literature review focused on the impact of quality assurance in PPHEIS.

Results

The semi-structured questionnaire that consisted of closed and open ended items was sent to 10 Public and Private Higher Education Institutions (PPHEIs) in Namibia. A total of 7 (70%) out of 10 PPHEIs completed and returned the questionnaire. The overall response rate of 70% was high and that warranted that the survey results were representative of the survey population (Odera-Kwach, 2011:102). Fincham (2008) contends that response rates of at most 60% for most research should be the goal of researchers. In support of Fincham's (2008) views, Babbie (2010:273) maintains that:

"There is no absolutely acceptable level of response to mail survey, except for 100%. While it is possible to achieve response rates of 70% or more, most mail surveys probably fall below that level."
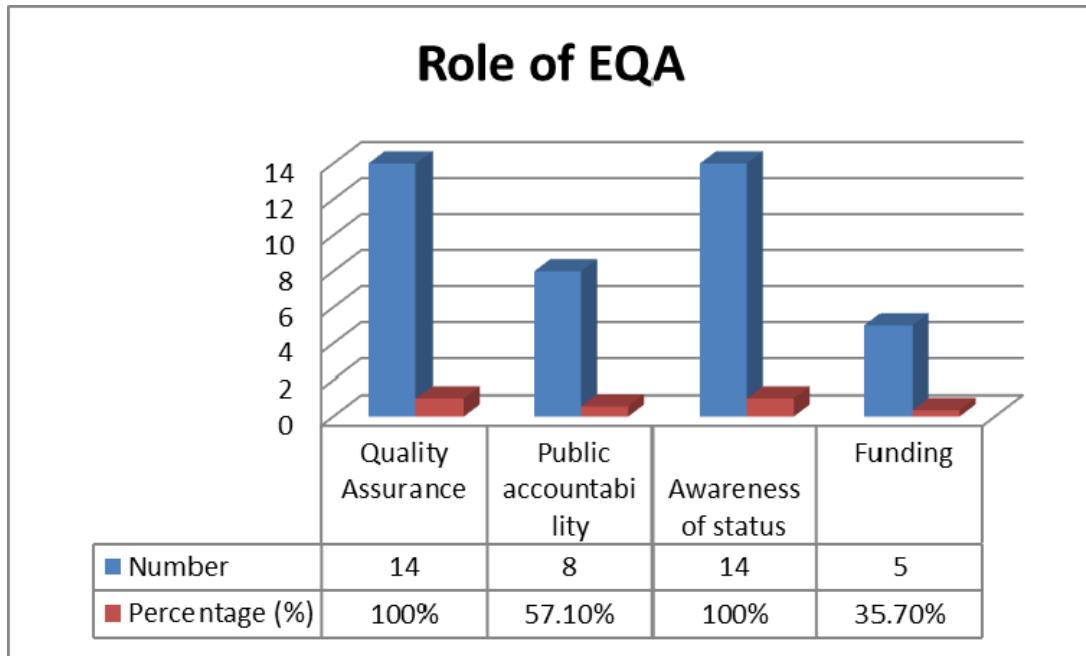
Figure 1: Role of EQA as cited by respondents (n=14)

The findings in Figure 1 revealed that 14 (100%) of the respondents in seven of the PPHEIs   cited quality assurance and awareness of status as the key roles of the NQA's external quality assurance. More than half 8 (57.10%) cited public accountability as another role of EQA.   More than a third 5 (35.70%) cited funding as the role of NQA's EQA. The findings support Eaton (2009); Martin and Stella's (2007) observations that   the main functions of EQA and the main functions of Quality Assurance (Accreditation) were quality control, public accountability, funding and awareness of status.

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Strengths of the accreditation

The respondents were asked to respond to an open-ended question "*Can you describe what you perceive are the strengths of NQA external Quality Assurance*" The responses by the respondents on their beliefs about the strengths of NQA External Quality Assurance on their institutions are summarized in Figure 2 below.
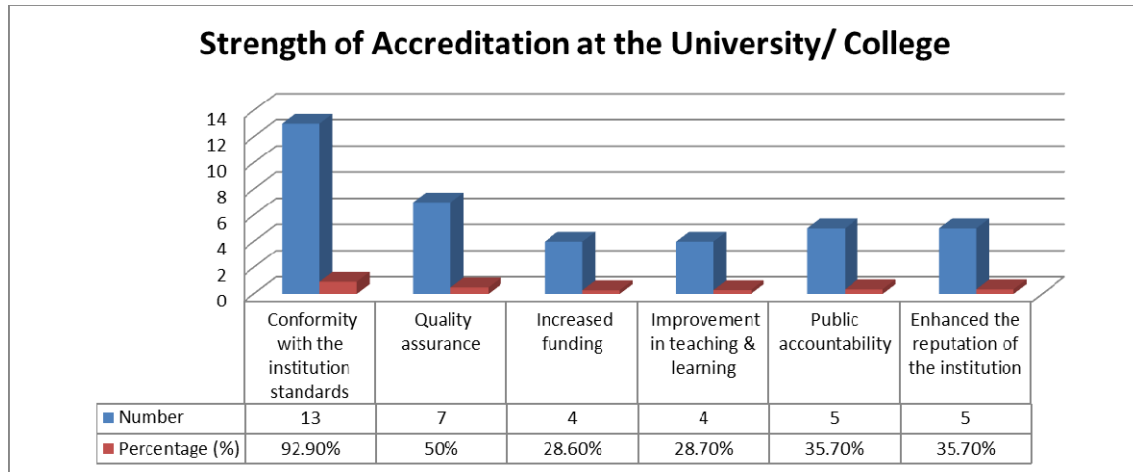
Figure2. Strengths of Accreditation at the University/ College respondents (n=14)

From Figure 2 above, it is evident that the overwhelming majority 13(92.90%) reported that conformity with the PPHEIs standards was one of the key strengths of External quality Assurance of NQA followed by PPHEIs' quality assurance. More than a third 5(35.70%) of the respondents reported PPHEIs' public accountability and enhancement of their reputations as other key strengths of the External Quality Assurance by NQA.

Perceived Impact of External Quality Assurance on Public and Private Institutions of Higher Learning
The 14 respondents from 10 Public and private Institutions of Higher Learning in Namibia were asked to rate items on a five -point   Likert scale (5- represents high impact, 3 – moderate impact, and 1- represents low) with regards to the perceived impact of Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA)'s External Quality Assurance on their: governance, strategic planning and quality management, Teaching and   learning, Research and Training, Internationalisation in Higher Education, Administrative support, and community engagement

Table 1 Present the six possible Impact of EQA.The areas EQA

Perceived impact of EQA	Overall Mean score	Maximum Score	Percentage
EQA has led to the improvement on Governance, strategic planning and quality management		5	
1.1) Strategic planning process	3.3		
1.2) Alignment of strategic plan with operational and functional plans	3.5		
1.3)Quality assurance framework and implementation	4.1		
1.4) Consultation/communication with staff, students and other stakeholders	3.4		
1.5) financial management	3.5		
Grand Mean Score	**3.56**	**5**	**71.20%**

2. EQA has led to the improvement on Teaching and learning			
2.1) Consistent implementation of academic policies	3.4		
2.2) Quality assurance process for course development and approval	3.8		
2.3) Quality management of students assessments	3.3		
2.4) external advice on course development	3.5		
2.5) Learning and teaching outcomes	3.4		
Grand mean Score	**3.5**	**5**	**70.00%**
3. EQA has led to the improvement on Research and training			
3.1) supervision of research students	2.5		
3.2) Review of research centers	1.9		
3.3) Research and research training outcomes	2.0		
3.4) Tracking performance in research	1.8		
3.5) resources and facilities for research students	2.5		
Grand mean score	**2.14**	**5**	**42.8%**
4. EQA has led to the improvement Internationalisation in Higher Education			
4.1)EQA processes for marketing, admissions and credit transfer	2.8		
4.2)EQA processes for offshore / onshore course/partnership/contracts	2.5		
4.3)Process for the review of offshore/onshore programme partner	2.4		
4.4)Risk Management process for offshore/onshore programmes	2.4		

4.5)Resources and support for offshore students (library, learning skills etc.)	2.3		
Grand mean score	**2.5**	**5**	**50.0%**
5. EQA has led to the improvement on Administrative support			
5.1) Workload management	3.00		
5.2) Performance development and review process	3.00		
5.3) Workforce development and succession strategy	2.60		
5.4) Resourcing of student support services	3.13		
5.5) Training and professional development of staff	3.0		
Grand mean score	**2.95**	**5**	**58.92%**
6. EQA has led to the improvement on Community engagement			
6.1) Strategy and framework for community engagement	2.63		
6.2) Leadership in community engagement	2.5		
6.3) Resourcing and support for community engagement	2.75		
6.4) Incentives for staff involved in community engagement activities	2.25		
6.5) Key performance indicators for community engagement	2.25		
Grand mean score	2.48	5	49.6%

Source: Adopted From Gertze, F.   Study 2014

From Table 2 above, It is evident that out of the six possible impact of Namibia Qualification Authority's External quality Assurance activities presented to the seven Public and Private Institutions of Higher Learning,   EQA has led to improved provision on governance, strategic planning and quality management was rated highest with a grand mean score of 3.56(71.20%)

Using qualitative methods approach Shah (2011:56) found that EQA had an impact on

> "*Australia Universities with regards to: improved governance of universities with a greater role by their academic boards and councils in monitoring quality, improved data and information management systems*"

The EQA led to improved provision on teaching and learning rated   as second with a grand mean score of 3.5 out of a maximum of 5 representing 70.00**%.** The third highest impact was EQA has led to improved provision of community engagement with a grand mean score of 2.95 (58.92%).These resultssupportShal (2011); Umeozor et al (2016);Odera-Kwach, B.A (2011) findings that EQA led to improved provision of community engagement and teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The findings of NQA external quality Assurance on the PPHEIs in Namibia were mixed due to the fact that this was the first EQA carried out on PPHEIs where each institution was held accountable to maintain a high standard of institutional quality.

In sum, the PPHEIs have acquired the essence of quality requirements as each PPHEI subjected itself to the EQA conducted by NQA. Similarly, the EQA had made moderate impact on the PPHEIs' governance and strategic planning, teaching and learning as well as physical development of infrastructures and administrative support systems.

Identifying and fleshing out true public impact is essential for reporting and accountability. The demand for impact information mounts as lawmakers, the NQA, the public and all relevant partners want to know about the return on their investments in quality assurance. Key to this study is the understanding of the benefits and impact that EQA of PPHEIs have for the nation (SeeAfrican Union (AU) April 2018*).*

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