

Internal quality assurance systems in Namibian higher education: Stakeholder perceptions and guidelines for enhancing the system

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Abstract

Namibian higher education institutions (HEIs) have been striving to enhance quality assurance in the last decade. Building internal quality assurance (QA) capacity has been challenging. We explored the perceptions and experiences of internal QA stakeholders. This research is embedded in Margret Archer's social realism theory as a guide to improving internal QA systems. We adopted a case study design based on an interpretive paradigm. Two purposively selected HEIs with university status were selected, and we recruited participants from the universities' population of stakeholders based on their roles. We conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders. The findings showed that although both institutions had QA units, the institutions were still facing challenges to attaining effective quality implementation and administration. Challenges to implementing QA include slow implementation of programme changes, mentorship programmes having an overemphasis on early career academics and causing potential mistrust, a lack of financial resources and students' engagement in QA activities.

Keywords: *Internal quality assurance; higher education institutions; quality assurance; quality; stakeholders' perceptions; social realism.*

1. Introduction

Globally, most countries have established units within higher education institutions (HEIs) responsible for ensuring the quality of higher education (HE). However, countries differ in their priorities for implementing quality education. We explored the internal quality assurance (IQA) implementation and administration of two Namibian HEIs. Participants suggested how IQA systems, mechanisms and processes could be improved. According to Kinser (2014), a historical perspective on effective standards emphasises how important it is to embark on business operations. The concept of quality is not a unitary one; definitions are relative to context and judgements. In the same vein, in modern education, the idea of quality affirmation emerged in the HE fraternity as a borrowed concept derived from industrial and commercial settings (Kinser, 2014). Given the variety of views, Goldenberg (2018) emphasises that quality has no unequivocal definition but rather is constructed through consensus and dialogue among the interested parties. Quality in HEIs is a somewhat elusive and complex concept that requires a good regulatory framework that mandates, promotes and ensures quality attainment. Globally, QA has become crucial to the extent that it is no longer an option; but a requirement in the HE fraternity. HE plays a vital role in any country's social and economic development since it produces graduates who are highly qualified for socio-economic development; furthermore, the global mode of living is constantly evolving, and educational systems must keep up to be relevant to their economies (Balogun, Olajide, & Adenagbe, 2022). There is a constant need to find new strategic ways to ensure continuous improvement and accommodate contemporary needs in the HE environment. According to Isaeva et al. (2020), the involvement of all the stakeholders improves the actual quality of education; for instance, students' engagement positively impacts their learning and increases their sense of belonging, building trust and confidence between the institution and the students. In the Namibian context, education was unequal before political independence from the South African colonial regime, and native children attended schools based on their tribes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). At that time, the Namibian education system was designed to strengthen the apartheid system instead of providing the required human resources to ensure equitable economic and social development, and such practice significantly impacted the standard of education offered in Namibia (Katjavivi, 2016). It was fragmented along ethnic lines and racial groups in the Bantu Education System, enforced in Namibia's non-white communities (Katjavivi, 2016). Hence, the unequal system brought about vast discrepancies in the allocation of financial and physical resources and the quality of education offered to those ethnic groups. After independence, the desire to provide quality education for everyone became a necessity. The government started initiating and implementing measures to improve the quality of education, particularly in HEIs. According to Katjavivi (2016), the Namibian government has developed initiatives to improve the quality of education within the policy framework, namely the Education Sector Improvement

Programme (ETSIP). The ETSIP is a medium-term strategic plan aimed at improving quality and efficiency in the education sector. The improvement programme was developed as a remedial framework to enhance the educational weaknesses identified by the Namibian government, such as the unsatisfactory performance of the students, poor quality teaching and untrained teachers (Katjavivi, 2016). ETSIP aimed to align Namibia's vision 2030 with the education system to transform Namibia into an industrialised and knowledge-based society. This vision can only be realised if HE provision is of acceptable quality (Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019). The Namibian government established statutory Quality Assurance Agencies such as the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) (HE Act No. 26, 2003 [Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia, 2003]). The NCHE was launched in November 2005 to promote and coordinate an effective HE system in Namibia and monitor QA mechanisms of HEIs. According to Iipumbu and Kadhila (2020), different countries have established QA mechanisms at institutional and national levels. Hence, quality matters are handled by the Internal Quality Assurance Committee at the institutional level. In contrast, an external QA panel deals with all the national-level matters on quality. IQA committees evaluate various models for ensuring quality, such as institutional audits, programme accreditation, and institutional accreditation. Given this background, it is evident that QA has become a global phenomenon, and Namibian HEIs are finding it challenging to implement well-established QA mechanisms effectively (Iiping et al., 2020; Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019). We aimed to explore the perceived effectiveness of IQA implementation and administration in HEIs.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework supporting this research is Margaret Archer's (1995) theory of social realism which was employed as an analytical tool to assist us in exploring the state of the IQA in Namibian HEIs in the provision of quality HE. Such a theoretical perspective enabled researchers to conceptualise how QA could improve IQA practices at Namibian HEIs. Archer (1995) distinguishes three interrelated dimensions: structure, agent, and culture, which co-exist in any social set-up. For analytical purposes, these dimensions are isolated; however, in the real world, they are connected. Archer (1995) articulates that studying these dimensions is crucial to understanding how the social setting functions. The structure dimension is associated with material interest, recurring patterns of social behaviours, or differentiating how aspects of society are related (Archer, 1995). Several concepts are related to structure, such as race, gender, social class and education. In the current study, the structural dimension consists of various aspects in place within the HEIs context, such as QA policies, frameworks and regulations, committees responsible for ensuring quality education, and QA divisions. Agents are the individuals such as QA practitioners, students, administrative staff and academics; only through their actions can the

IQA structures be constructed, reconstructed and transformed. Regarding culture, QA units in the Namibian HEIs should be highly valued and composed of dedicated and committed individuals responsible for ensuring quality education within Namibian HEIs and the related policies. It could become obsolete when HE keeps changing, but the IQA remains static (morpho stasis), and these two systems will fail to live up to their purposes. We explored: (i) how stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of the IQA implementation and administration in Namibian HEIs, (ii) how stakeholders perceive the successes and challenges facing Namibian HEIs when implementing and administering the IQA, (iii) how IQA systems of Namibian HEIs could be improved from a stakeholder perspective.

3. Materials and Methods

We conducted a case study based on an interpretive paradigm in two selected HEIs with university status: public and private, and they had established QA units. The sample was purposefully selected to match the criteria of the type of subject under investigation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and member checking was done to enhance the study's trustworthiness.

3.1. Sample and Instrument

Participants were purposively selected based on their positions, first-hand experiences and strategic roles regarding the phenomenon under study from the two HEIs (12 participants; 6 from each HEI). The participants were deans of the two faculties in each university since deans are responsible for hosting and managing the quality within their faculties. The QA units and a QA coordinator were selected in each university since they are the custodians of QA and coordinate QA systems and programmes. Moreover, participants from the Student Representative Council were purposively selected to represent the student body since the students are primary beneficiaries of quality education. The interview guide was developed to gain an understanding of the participants' current experiences and perceptions of the IQA systems, mechanisms and processes.

3.2. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Participants' verbatim interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used for identifying, analysing and reporting themes from the data gathered (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). We enhance the trustworthiness through a special inspection conducted by two researchers who evaluated the findings, interpretations and conclusions. We obtained ethical clearance from all the relevant authorities and institutions involved. All the participants received consent letters, participated voluntarily, and transcripts were anonymised. The findings are presented in the next section based on the emerging themes.

4. Findings

4.1. Slow Implementation of Programme Changes Hinder Advancement and Negatively Impacts Students

Some participants emphasised that courses and programmes are subject to slow change. *“Few programmes become obsolete in our institution when the relevant staff members delay and fail to review it on time and identify the relevant and current programmes that assist in responding to the national needs”* (QA practitioner, HEIA). From participants’ perspectives, the speed of updating courses was insufficient. Participants in both HEIs felt that the departments took too long to implement changes and that slow implementation is a barrier to advancement, negatively impacting students’ employability in the job markets. In the book by Lim (2018) on QA in HE in developing countries, the need for HEIs to absorb new information faster and to apply new processes faster is emphasised.

4.2. Mentorship for QA Purposes: Overemphasis on Early Career Academics and Potential for Mistrust

Mentorship or peer review is a part of the QA of teaching in HEIs (Sachs & Parsell, 2014). Although participants saw the value of mentorship programmes within their HEIs, they pointed out that it reduced the trust between the students and the monitored lecturer (usually early-career academics) *“You may find a supervisor in the faculty that sits in the class where a colleague is teaching and thereafter gives some hints and advice on improving the teaching; however, this brings a problem of trust between a person who is being mentored and students”* (Dean, HEIB), and that it tended to be available only for early-career academics *“Our lecturers’ teaching strategies are being monitored and evaluated by a senior lecturer”* (Student, HEIB). Literature highlights the importance of continuing professional development of all teachers in HEIs (novice or expert), which include peer observation, as there are constant development and rapid changes in education (Ercan & Ivanova, 2020), especially during the fourth industrial revolution. Literature also highlights the issues of mistrust and suspicion that go with peer review but emphasises the need for transparent processes for all to build trust (Sachs & Parsell, 2014).

4.3. Staff shortages, Lack of Adequately Trained Staff and Lack of QA Expertise

A lack of adequately trained staff and QA expertise and a shortage of staff within both HEIs also emerged as a challenge. *“Another challenge is that quality assurance is a new field in Namibian HEIs; there is a lack of expertise in the country because not everybody has formal training in the quality assurance course. Most of our quality assurance practitioners were teachers before, we tend to think we are doing quality assurance, but we are doing it trial and error the way we understand what it is and how it should be”* (QA practitioner, HEIA). *“I think the whole issue of workload, the people who are supposed to review these policies*

are the same people that supposed to carry out other duties, so, it then becomes a bit burdensome” (Dean, HEIA). “Another strength is that we have a quality assurance dedicated team. However, I indicated that one of the challenges is a lack of expertise” (QA practitioner, HEIB). This study indicated that a lack of adequately trained staff and QA expertise and a staff shortage are some challenges that hinder the effective implementation of QA initiatives in Namibian HEIs. The findings of this research agreed with findings from the literature, such as Lim (2018), who found that most universities in sub-Saharan African countries have a shortage of qualified local staff and are forced to employ foreign academics, especially at senior level, to provide the necessary expertise needed.

4.4. QA Progress Hindered by Resistance to Change in the HE Sector

The participants said that a challenge facing Namibian HEIs is resistance to change, which hinders the implementation of QA improvements due to misconceptions about what QA can do for an institution. *“Some staff members have annual amnesia, and they must be reminded all the time. So, it is a human factor, the human element in implementing the IQA mechanisms, that create resistance to change. Like all dynamic institutions, resistance from the stakeholders may arise when a new standard has been set. When stakeholders do not comply for various reasons, the IQA mechanism faces a dilemma” (Academic, HEIB). Some QA stakeholders regarded the QA system as a policing strategy. Furthermore, most participants mentioned a lack of support from the top management. “One of the challenges is also a lack of support from top management; sometimes, as a quality assurance division would like to implement some of the new things that we think will add value to the well-being of our institution. However, there is a lack of the senior management leaders’ blessings” (QA practitioner, HEIA). In the book by Lim (2018) on QA in HE in developing countries, it is mentioned that employees of HEIs are not necessarily against continuous quality improvement and changes, but rather, they are “creatures of habit with a natural fear of the unknown” (p. 35). QA management must educate members of the HEI so that QA is perceived as a continuous improvement and maintenance channel. The findings indicate that it is important for the QA stakeholders to develop ownership of the QA system to deal with the negative perceptions about QA systems, mechanisms and processes. Deans of faculties and QA practitioners need to know that QA promotes transparency and accountability of the academic systems instead of policing strategies. At the same time, stakeholders need to know that QA is vital for improving their educational equity and efficiency and supporting the ongoing development of the T&L process.*

4.5. Lack of Financial Resources for QA Systems

Some challenges to QA in Namibian institutions, such as a lack of financial resources and budgetary constraints, contribute to ineffective IQA processes (Hoosen, Chetty, & Butcher, 2017). Institutions require sufficient financial resources and planning to support and sustain

institutional activities. Participants pointed out that limited financial resources were their main stumbling block in attaining QA in education. *“Challenges are limited financial resources to cater for all activities in the teaching and learning processes. This will not allow us to do regular visits to other campuses due to financial constraints”* (Dean, HEIB).

4.6. Heavy Workload Reduces Opportunities for QA Implementation

Some participants stated that the heavy workloads of the QA stakeholders could be hindrances in attaining quality education. *“I think the whole issue of workload, the people who are supposed to review these policies are the same people that supposed to carry out other duties, so, it then becomes a bit burdensome”* (Dean, HEIA). Heavy workloads negatively impacting QA practices in HEIs, specifically in developing sub-Saharan African countries, is not new information, as has been published, for example, by Uzhenyu (2015), within a Zimbabwean context and Abe and Mugobo (2021) within a South African context.

4.7. Lack of Technological Resources as a Hindrance to QA Implementation

The participants mentioned a lack of advanced technology as an aspect that emerged from the challenges perceived by QA stakeholders. Internet access plays a major role in the T&L processes, research and community engagement required for quality education. The findings indicated that student participants perceived a need to improve HEIs technology and internet connectivity. *“I would say the poor internet connections in our institution is a big problem for us students because we only do our learning activities in class; we do not have any platforms for doing things online learning or outside classes”* (Student, HEIA). There is a great need to improve their online courses and programmes, particularly during times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The internet provides access to positive benefits on educational attainment, and it has been utilised as a significant instrument for facilitating effective academic activities in HEIs. However, limited internet connectivity in studies in Namibian HEIs has listed poor internet connectivity as a challenge (Magesa & Josua, 2022). The educational setbacks could have a notably negative impact on students’ academic success since not all the students have access to computers with the internet, which is a concern, particularly during times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

We aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of the QA stakeholders in Namibian HEIs. It is important to understand stakeholders’ perceptions, experiences, and attitudes involved in facilitating QA systems to determine the roles their experiences and perceptions play in executing that process successfully. This research provides recommendations based on the findings that could improve the Namibian HE QA systems. It is worth noting that the recommendations are somewhat aspirational and would require time and resources. This

research contributes to the crucial debates of IQA in Namibian HEIs and will hopefully provide insights into the future direction of this vigorous topic in Namibian HEIs.

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