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Original Research Article

Curriculum Development in Institutions of Higher Learning: Programme Curriculum Reviewing at the University of Rwanda

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This paper focused on the role of periodic review of curriculum to improve the quality of education in response to the needs of stakeholders and organizations who provide employment opportunities to university graduates. The quality of education in higher education institutions forms a backbone to the human capacity entering the labour market. This paper investigated the usefulness of structuring academic curriculum in relation to the desired competence of individuals/graduates entering the labour market. It viewed tertiary education as one of the important factors in both social and economic development efforts in any society/country. The East African Community has introduced assessment instruments as a method to ensure the quality of education and the relevance of academic curriculum, in lieu of efforts towards socio-economic development and poverty reduction. Lessons learnt from conducting quality assurance assessments by means of student evaluation interviews and programme curriculum reviews, showed that it is possible to improve the quality and competence of human capital entering the labour market, through framing the academic curriculum based on relevant stakeholders, organizations and societal needs. The research was carried out at the University of Rwanda, at the School of Architecture and Built Environment, in the Department of Creative Design.

Keywords: Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Learning Outcomes, Curriculum Review.

INTRODUCTION

The UNICEF Common Country Assessment report of Rwanda (2013) states that the country's commitment to education is part of an overall national priority to rebuild and expand human capital. The Rwandan government views education and resources development as critical prerequisites to poverty reduction and the driving force towards social and economic growth of the nation (UNICEF, 2013). Some of the challenges continuously highlighted in Rwanda's education sector include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials and poorly paid teachers (UNICEF, 2013).

The WorldBank (1999) asserts that the conflict that began in 1990, which ended in the 1994 genocide could be one of the reasons for the inadequacies within the education sector. This has resulted in the allocation of public funds more towards security expenditures rather than towards basic social services and poverty reduction (WorldBank, 1999). This remark

explains the reason for low budget allocation towards teaching materials, resources and teachers' salaries.

Significance of Study

This study supports the notion that the relevance and competence of university graduates to the labour market is a concern of the government, employers and other stakeholders involved in the provision of quality higher education in Rwanda (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Statement of Problem

In the text titled '*Improvement Towards Excellence: Internal Quality Assurance Review*', Shange and Muneza (2015) mention that every department within institutions of higher education in Rwanda, is required to periodically review and

evaluate its academic curriculum programme. The objective of the internal reviews is to provide knowledge and understanding of departmental needs, which could be beneficial in planning for the future (Shange & Muneza, 2015). The article explains that academic course modules are reviewed to ensure that the curriculum remains current and relevant to intended achievements and expectations of the employment market (Shange & Muneza, 2015). The research for this paper was collected through views and opinions from academic staff members, students, alumni and stakeholders in the employment market.

Objective of Study

The objective of this study was to determine the value of quality assurance in advancing the quality of education in institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. In this case, quality assurance focuses on curriculum reviewing of academic programme in the Department of Creative Design.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The WorldBank (1997) reported a gender gap that appears to exist at tertiary level in Rwanda. The report revealed that in the year 1997, women formed only twenty-eight percent of the population enrolled in tertiary institutions (1997). Most of the women were enrolled in art subjects in which technical and scientific subjects, as well as vocational training was reserved for men (WorldBank, 1997). Author Dr. Arjun Pangannavar (2015), in his article titled, '*A Research Study on Rural Empowerment through Women Empowerment.*', notes the positive impact of women empowerment in development and poverty reduction.

Consequently, the percentage of females/women in Rwanda, who are enrolled in institutions of higher education across all disciplines appears to have increased. This suggests that whilst efforts towards social and economic development progresses, women empowerment is also taking place. This gives credence to Dr. Pangannavar's views on the importance of including programmes that promote women empowerment within strategies for social and economic development. However, this paper does not focus directly on women empowerment, but the quality of education in institutions of higher learning, for both males and females.

Higher Education

Research scholar Penelope Mbabazi (2013) agrees that higher education may be understood as a central element to social, economic and political development, in a globalizing knowledge society. Authors Knight and Yorke (2003) add that governments, employers and other stakeholders tend to expect higher education to contribute to the development of a variety of complex/scarcely skills, which would enhance human capital and increase the economic well being of the nation.

Harvey (2000) sheds light to this argument by saying that, in order to promote innovation and creativity intended for the development of a knowledge based society/economy, higher education must experience wider participation, improved retention, enhanced employability and encouragement for lifelong learning.

Materu (2007) supports Harvey (2000) that higher education should motivate for lifelong or continual learning. However, Materu argues that higher learning institutions in Africa tend to face the challenge of adjusting their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods, to

modern technological developments, teamwork and communication skills (2000).

Both Harvey and Materu make plausible arguments, they highlight quality assurance as a crucial factor in ensuring quality and relevance of academic curriculum, at the same time being mindful of the contribution of tertiary education in developing a knowledge based society/economy (2000; 2007). As pointed out by Knight & Yorke that there is an expectation placed on higher/tertiary education to provide competent human capital with expertise in complex/scarcely skills (2003).

Quality Assurance

The Commission of Higher Education Handbook in Kenya, defines quality assurance as "a continuous process of evaluating, assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of a higher education system, institution or academic programmes offered by the institution" (2008: 8).

The handbook explains that the quality assurance process serves to ensure that quality control checks are performed periodically, to determine the effectiveness of programmes, with regards to aims, objectives and the success of students in achieving intended learning outcomes (Commission of Higher Education Handbook, 2008).

Furthermore, the handbook states that quality assurance may be understood differently by different people. For instance, students may focus on facilities provided and the usefulness of education on future employment. Whilst academic staff may pay attention to the learning process, management may give importance to the institution's achievement. Similarly, parents may consider the achievement of their children, when employees may focus on the competence of the graduates (Commission of Higher Education Handbook, 2008).

The handbook goes on to say that the periodic quality control checks may take into consideration reports from external examiners, members of staff, feedback from student evaluations, alumni, reports from employers/professionals and other accreditation bodies (Commission of Higher Education Handbook, 2008). The information and responses from all these sources may then lead to adjustments to curriculum or the assessment of teaching methods employed in the programme (Commission of Higher Education, 2008:7).

With regard to the accreditation or approval of academic programmes, the commission is expected to ensure that students who obtain university education in private institutions are adaptable to national requirements by linking the course learning outcomes with societal social and economic needs of a country (Commission of Higher Education, 2008). Therefore, the standards to be achieved by course learning outcomes should be defined and set at the various university institutions in relation to the social and economic needs of the country (Commission of Higher Education, 2008).

Curriculum Assessment

The Commission of Higher Education (2008) defines curriculum as an organized programme of study for a given degree, diploma, certificate award incorporating all matters such as academic staff requirements, duration of academic programme, admission requirements, content requirements and the requirements of the assessment process. The assessment process includes available academic resources, physical, equipment, learning materials, texts and journals,

which are essential in supporting implementation of the curriculum (Commission of Higher Education, 2008).

To achieve this, the Commission of Higher Education (2008) states that it is important to select a curriculum assessment committee who are tasked to review curriculum standards and guidelines, develop, review and ensure standards and regulations of courses of study, establish the availability and sustainability of teaching and research facilities, this includes equipment and learning materials required. The committee is also responsible for evaluating recruitment levels in terms of quantity and quality. Lastly, the assessment committee is in charge of approving academic programmes (Commission of Higher Education, 2008).

The Inter-University of East Africa (IUCEA) is a body of the East African Community (EAC). The objective of IUCEA is to maintain high and comparable academic standards in higher education regionally and internationally (IUCEA, 2010). In the year 2006, when this project was launched, the East African Countries involved were Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Following the inclusion of Rwanda and Burundi to the East African Community, some of the higher education institutions in these two country's have joined in IUCEA as partner states. In Rwanda, the Regulatory Agency is the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE).

The promotion of Quality Assurance and maintenance of comparable international academic standards in the East African Universities is one of the primary concerns of IUCEA (IUCEA, 2010). Lending to earlier insights that quality assurance process requires evaluation criteria and assessment instrument, the IUCEA have established a quality assurance system for higher education in East Africa.

The quality assurance processes in East Africa focus on three areas, the incorporation of learning outcomes in the programmes and courses for accreditation status, benchmarking learning outcomes to respond to national, regional and international goals, and experts for programme evaluation for accreditation purposes (IUCEA, 2010). Lastly, institutional accreditation has been added to the Regulatory Agency's database (IUCEA, 2010).

The latest trend in programme development requires the concurrent development of the programmes frame of reference, highlighting competencies, skills and attitudes, which should be aligned to National Qualifications Framework. The quality assurance framework requires "each academic unit to clearly articulate learning outcomes that are appropriate to the discipline and are consistent with the institutions mission, degree level expectations and academic plans" (University of Guelph, 2011: 2).

Learning Outcomes

Researchers Kenny and Desmarais (2009) explain that learning outcomes provide the base for an effectively aligned and integrated curriculum. The curriculum should incorporate instructional activities and assessment strategies/instruments, which are linked to course specific and degree level learning outcomes. The learning outcomes should also be tied to the institutional and provincially defined graduate degree level expectations (Kenny & Desmarais, 2009).

Pideaux (2003) adds that the learning outcomes of a curriculum can be viewed from three vantage points: what is intended or planned, what is delivered and what is experienced. Further to this, Harden et al. (1999, 2007b) remarks that learning outcomes provide a powerful framework upon which the curriculum is structured. He continues that learning outcomes in curriculum planning should be integrated

and aligned within and between a sequence of courses, which promote a learner-centred approach. They should encourage a self-directed approach to learning that allows students to take responsibility and actively evaluate progress of their studies (Harden, 1999; 2007).

Harvey (1999: 2007) continues that all instructors involved in the programme must collaborate to identify gaps, redundancies and ensure that decisions related to the curriculum and learning environment are reorganized and updated. In addition, the preparation of effective learning outcomes is centred on curriculum planning that has assessment instruments, which are able to continuously monitor, evaluate, improve and assure quality of educational programmes (Harvey, 1999: 2007).

Anderson et al. (2001) and Harden (2002) describe Learning Outcomes as direct statements that are essential and bearing disciplinary knowledge and abilities that will allow students to progress, and the depth of learning, knowledge and skills that is expected upon completion of a program or course. Simply put, they explain that learning outcomes should focus on transferable knowledge skills and behaviours that can be assessed and should reflect disciplinary contexts. Learning outcomes must be balanced because it may be difficult to monitor and assess if they are too broad (Anderson et al., 2001; Harden, 2002).

Anderson and Harden conclude by emphasizing that a long detailed list of learning outcomes is likely to limit flexibility and adaptation in the curriculum (2001; 2002). For example, learning outcomes for an art/design programme could include statements such as: at the end of the programme, students are expected to acquire creative problem solving skills within their field. Students should display the ability to conduct research and synthesis of technical, aesthetic and conceptual knowledge. Students should be able to communicate their ideas professionally, and connect with their intended audience using visual, oral, and written presentation skills relevant to their field (Anderson et al., 2001; Harden, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

The curriculum review process at the Department of Creative Design followed guidelines of the quality assurance structure and used the instruments designed by IUCEA for institutions of higher learning, which form part of the East African Community. The IUCEA developed instruments for internal quality assurance, which refer to self-assessment of programme, departmental and institutional levels (2010). These assessment instruments focus on subjects such as monitoring student progress, pass-rate, dropout rate, feedback from students, alumni, the labour market and research performance. The objective of these instruments is evaluating the effectiveness of each course and curriculum, research, service evaluation and student feedback on the quality of teaching staff. In addition, the instruments assess other specific activities, such as, the availability of teaching materials, facilities and student support (IUCEA, 2010).

The IUCEA handbook further explains that evaluation criteria of the assessment instruments focus on curriculum standards, which ensure that guidelines for academic programme curriculum preparation and the development of study materials are in place, to successfully perform quality assurance assessment of academic programme (2010). The program content is built based on the curriculum standards, which highlight the common courses, the core or elective courses and the learning outcomes of each course. A detailed module description form is required, which is made readily

available to both students and teaching staff members (IUCEA, 2010).

The content description includes details of lecture hours, student hours and the minimum load for each course which is to be offered. The content description specifies the pass mark or grade of each course, the minimum number of courses a student is required to take in order to qualify for an academic award. The form outlines the conditions under which a candidate may be required to undertake either a special examination, re-sit an examination or repeat an entire academic year. The description form includes details of the conditions under which the student may be discontinued from the programme altogether (IUCEA, 2010).

The handbook notes that the proposed curriculum is assessed on the basis of the coursework administered throughout the academic year or section of the academic year through tutorials, essays, tests, laboratory exercises or other mode acceptable to the university (IUCEA, 2010).

Bearing in mind that the curriculum programme reviewing in the Department of Creative Design had most of the description forms for each course module currently offered, this became the starting point for the reviews. Many of the courses have only been completed in the first, four-year cycle since introduction, thus there were many fields in the forms which were not completed.

As the modules had been introduced at different times, some of them seemed to have an overlap in the desired learning outcomes. In such cases, a consensus decision was made to either merge or phase out some of the course modules. The overarching objective was to have three specializations, which commence from level three of study. The three specialization areas are Environmental Design, Media & Communication Design and Product Design. All the course modules before the third level have been structured to feed into these elective fields.

DISCUSSION

The reviewing process began with a series of meetings with staff members. Each module course was reviewed in relation to the envisaged aims/objectives in improving the program. Based on the literature reviewed, it was important to structure the program and also evaluate the availability of equipment, materials and qualified staff members in the courses planned. This was helpful in organizing and planning for the new course modules, which would be introduced following approval of the reviewed curriculum. The reviewing process evaluated learning outcomes for each module included in the programme, in order to relate them to the needs of industry, society and other relevant stakeholders in which Creative Design Department students are employed after graduation.

Regular discussions took place with CRD staff members to discuss each stage of the process. This was time consuming due to the repeated revision of different parts of each module, which was done by different members. The distribution of the modules was based on prior experience in having facilitated the module. The understanding was that it would be easier to review a module a person has taught because they would have identified areas that may need improvement or aspects that have become redundant. The areas of improvement or redundancy were measured against the social and economic needs of the design industry, society and other stakeholder organizations that offer graduates, internship or employment.

Apart from repositioning course modules or merging those with identical module content, more than six new modules have been included. The new modules are distributed from

Media & Communication to Environmental and Product Design. Currently, the program offers two specializations; Media & Communication and Environmental Design, Product Design will be offered for the first time in the beginning of the next academic calendar. The planning and preparation for this third specialization had to flow from first level such that learners have the necessary prior knowledge to manage the third level where they will focus on the single design field.

FINDINGS

There appears to be a challenge, in Rwanda, with regards to the integration or employability of design students because the design industry is in its infancy stages. According to informal discussions with some industry representatives and alumni, Media & Communication Design students tend to have better employment opportunities compared to Environmental Design students. Some of the reasons shared is that the design industry at this time has resources and projects in media and communication sector.

From the learner's point of view, this may be a basis for choosing to specialize in Media & Communication Design. However, the reality is that the country is developing at a rapid rate, which means that job opportunities in the other specialization areas could also improve. In addition, knowledge and skills development is one of the areas highlighted in the country's vision and goals towards the year 2020. The Environmental and Product Design fields may seem as though they do not provide employment opportunities for graduates but, the social, economic and societal developments taking place could increase the demand for new/scarce skills, such as product designing, landscaping and interior design.

Product Designing includes fashion and furniture design modules. Rwanda is rich in natural fibre materials/plants resources, which is used to manufacture furniture. Also, there is a large market for innovative fashion clothing designs made from kitenge fabrics, with design styles inspired by social, economic and cultural heritage of the country. Platforms such as the annual Rwanda Fashion Show indicate the demand for more local fashion designers in the near future.

The views from the labour market and alumnus may be a reality. However, learners entering tertiary education need to allow themselves to be foresighted and begin seeing their future from 2020 backwards. To successfully reach the country's 2020 vision, many skills and expertise will be required, and it would be beneficial for the country to find those skills within the local population compared to depending on foreign work force.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, quality assurance as an instrument of ensuring quality education has been a positive approach towards the advancement of social and economic development efforts of the country. Moreover, this paper has shown that framing the higher education curriculum to feed into the needs of stakeholders, organizations providing employment has been a much needed step for development, and many other factors inclusive in the realization of vision 2020.

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