



# Conceptualizing Quality Assurance and its Application in Zimbabwe's Tertiary Education

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## Abstract:

The contribution of tertiary education to a nation's scientific and technological advancement is unquestionable. Thus, its institutions drive these ambitions through research, innovation, and industrialisation. In this context, this conceptual paper sought after the application of quality assurance procedures and mechanisms in Zimbabwean tertiary education. The research methodology was grounded in a qualitative desk study approach. This involved an electronic search query of the issue under review from peer-reviewed journals and proceedings. The findings and discussion in this conceptual paper revealed that in Zimbabwe, quality education is conceptualised as creating a conducive environment that enables the delivery of the curriculum using suitable methods to allow students to acquire relevant competencies. This is the basis for the operations in tertiary education to be grounded in the ethos of the Manpower Development Acts (Chapter 28:02) and Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (Chapter 25:27). These facilitate the creation of a system in tertiary education comprising external and internal assurance, accountability, continuous improvement, and accreditation interconnected to create a network, which enhances the system's operations. These findings provide insight into components of the quality assurance system and their role in entrenching quality culture in tertiary institutions to enhance the competitiveness of their products and services. The issue under discussion in this conceptual paper is of countless worth to issues of quality assurance in both private and public tertiary institutions.

*Keywords: Assurance, conceptualizing, education, quality, tertiary*

## INTRODUCTION

The world over the education system has undergone fundamental reforms to meet the need for human capital [1]. In most instances, these reforms are guided by constructivism and competence-based education philosophies [2]. This is done with the view to equip the human capital in the education system not only with the existing competences but also a broad range of broad skills [3]. This was done taking into cognisance that competitiveness of human capital from a country is mostly influenced by the quality of teaching-learning in tertiary education [4]. In this context, the transformation of the tertiary education underscores the relevance for students to be equipped with competences that enables them to be functional in the real world of work [5]. This brought to the forefront the need for quality assurance to be at the core of a top-down and centralised tertiary education system [6]. Thus, its organisational and operational structures are bureaucratic and hierarchical in nature (i.e., the Ministries of Higher and Tertiary Education,

Innovation, Science, and Technology Development) that oversees all the teaching-learning in tertiary institutions through monitoring structures [7]. This operational structure was introduced to improve institutional efficiency, effectiveness, competitiveness, and sustainability [8].

In this regard, it's significant to acknowledge that Zimbabwe's tertiary education system adopted a quality assurance procedure motivated by a 'one-size-fits-all' scheme [9]. Thus, its practices provide tertiary institutions with a structured, and systematic tertiary education system targeted at improving areas, such as students' competence levels [10]. However, its application in Zimbabwe's tertiary institutions has in some instances encountered challenges [11]. Thus, its relevance and appropriateness are at times questioned [12]. In this respect, the progressive integration of quality assurance system into tertiary education has not been accompanied, to the same extent, by rigorous research [13]. Thus, there is a dearth of literature interrogating the extent to which its application has transformed the relevant components of quality culture in tertiary education. It is in this respect that this conceptual paper is geared towards contributing to this discourse by expanding knowledge from a literature perspective on the application of the quality assurance in Zimbabwe's tertiary education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative desktop study approach in this conceptual paper uses arguments, thoughts, and expressions as evidence, instead of mathematical facts. Hence, the key phrases - quality in tertiary education, quality assurance, quality assurance structures, and drivers of quality in tertiary education in Zimbabwe guided the search for relevant information. The relevant literature was sourced through an electronic search that was delimited to articles and reviews accredited to Google Scholar, Scopus, Scielo, DOAJ, WoS, and IBSS since they would have undergone a rigorous peer review process [14]. Studies published between 2003 and 2023 on quality assurance and their role in tertiary education in Zimbabwe were carefully chosen and reviewed in pursuit of trends and themes. Data generation and analysis occurred simultaneously and iteratively. In this conceptual paper checks for consistency and credibility were done on the sourced data [15].

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Tertiary institutions commit to offering quality research, teaching, and service to their internal and external clients through involvement and continuous improvement [16]. Thus, this section focuses on the integration of quality assurance and its application in Zimbabwean tertiary education.

### **Quality and its Conceptualization in Tertiary Education**

The tertiary education in Zimbabwe comprises universities, polytechnics, teachers' training colleges, and technical-vocational training centres that mandate to impact relevant competencies through exposing students to the 'Heritage-Based 5.0' curriculum framework [17]. Thus, operations in tertiary education grounded in teaching, research, community service, innovation, and industrialisation. It is in this regard the Government of Zimbabwe, had made some effort to advance the quality of processes in tertiary education through the enactment of legislature to superintend over their operations. Thus, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) Act (Chapter 25:27) and Manpower Development Act (Chapter 28:02) were introduced to regulatory bodies for universities, and polytechnics respectively [18, 19]. These acts are expected to guide tertiary institutions in their quest towards making optimum contributions to Zimbabwe's scientific and technological advancement [20]. Hence, the quality success experience in some industrial and commercial settings necessitated the introduction of quality

assurance procedures, and strategies into the tertiary education context [21]. Thus, demand for the creation of quality culture in structures and operations of Zimbabwe's tertiary education was at the core of the nation's call for reforms.

In this regard, 'quality' has become a significant concept to all the stakeholders in tertiary education, in terms of their expectations from learning [22, 23]. This makes quality of education to be looked at through the process dimension (standards, reporting and control, students' needs, workflow, technology integration in operations, and industry integration); engagement and development dimension (motivation, critical thinking, problem-solving, interdisciplinarity, and flexible in learning designs); and content dimension (teaching and research integration, learning objectives, content quality, teaching strategies, and knowledge integration) [24]. In other words, quality education focuses on learning infrastructure and resources, technology, programme's relevance to industry, modules (content), lecturing methodology, attachments, lecturers' qualifications, and performance awards [25].

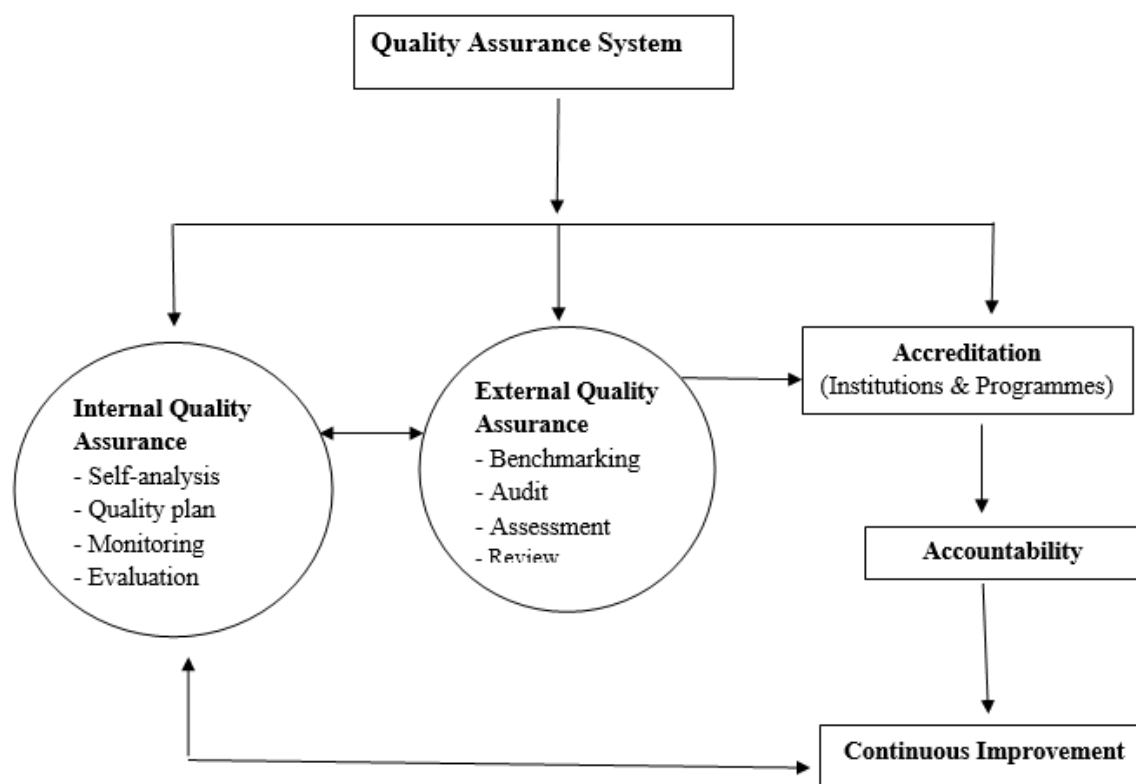
The purpose of tertiary education has always been to empower students with relevant competencies in anticipation they will be functional in a scientifically and technologically-charged society. Thus, tertiary education must ensure that what these students receive in teaching-learning activities is of expected quality. Therefore, quality in tertiary education is significant given the fact that what students learn affects their philosophy 'mindset' [26]. Therefore, quality education is considered as an entirety of features of products or services, which it them to satisfy society and students' desires [27]. In this case, quality is seen as a fortitude that enhances an institution to withstand stiff competition locally and even beyond. Therefore, the aspirations of the 'Heritage-Based Education 5.0' curriculum framework have set the tone for the need to improving the quality of education in tertiary institutions. This new thrust in education has increased demand for quality and has called for the government through the responsible ministries to mobilise substantial human, material, and financial resources to be used in learning activities. It is in this context, that quality assurance mechanisms, which encompass the interests of the organisation and the clients have been put in place in most tertiary institutions. In this regard quality in education can be looked into through multidimensional indicators (i.e., qualities of curriculum, teaching-learning, educational facilities, internal and external quality assurance procedures and graduates' competencies) that are interlinked [28]. This is dependent upon how tertiary institutions create a climate, which encourages academic excellence grounded in a system that fosters professional growth. This calls for the adoption of a holistic system that looks at the students and their learning context notwithstanding the societal reality in which the institutions operate [29]. It is against this background that the next section interrogates the quality assurance system in tertiary education are operationalised.

### **Quality Assurance System in Zimbabwe's Tertiary Education**

In Zimbabwe, quality assurance systems are integrated into tertiary education's operations with the view to maintaining quality in learning [30]. This is done through a series of planned and systematic actions (i.e., sound management practices, measurement methods, competent human capital, etc.) targeted at boosting confidence in both the internal and external clients of tertiary institutions [31]. The primary responsibility of Zimbabwe's tertiary institutions both private and public is to provide quality service to their internal and external clients. It is against this background that these institutions through responsible ministries adopted a quality assurance system comprising procedures, criteria, and mechanisms to be adhered to during day-to-day operations [32]. This is done in tertiary education targeted at safeguarding the quality of

performance by institutions in teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation [33]. Thus, institutions are monitored according to stipulated procedures and mechanisms.

Thus, these systems continuously monitor and evaluate institutions' performance in the context of set standards (i.e., what the institution does and how they do it). In this context, these quality assurance systems consist of an organised sequence of procedures (i.e., assessment, evaluation, rational decision making, planning, implementation, and reexamination to regulate anticipated alterations to the initial plan) [34]. Therefore, it can be advanced that internal and external quality assurance systems work hand-in-hand. Hence, these are viewed as creating a platform that enables institutions to operate bearing in mind the society's expectations. It's significant to acknowledge that the quality assurance in tertiary education comprises of various components, which intertwined to form an operational system [35]. Figure 1 is a representation of the interlinked components of a quality assurance system in tertiary education context.



**Fig. 1: Components of quality assurance in tertiary education**

(Source: Machumu & Kisanga [36])

Zimbabwe's tertiary education is expected to have the capacity to produce products and services that fulfil the necessities of both internal and external clients. This creates the need to transform the current governance strategy to one that fosters efficiency and accountability [37]. In this case, the capacity of tertiary institutions to produce quality products and services depends upon some drivers, which emphasize improving organisational processes, practices, and strategies [38]. It is against this background that quality is viewed as an important aspect concept in this discussion since it is around which both private and public tertiary institutions build competitive brands. Therefore, quality in tertiary education includes, among other things an effective system of

marketing; appropriateness and adequacy of facilities; human capital's qualification and experience; relevancy of programmes on offer; aptness of teaching-learning material, and a robust complaint handling structure.

In tertiary education, there has been an increase in the need for institutions to give attention to accountability [39]. Thus, institutions have introduced some market-based reforms that increase professional accountability to both internal and external clientele [40]. In this context, accountability can be looked at as a procedure through which tertiary institutions are obliged to account for their actions, strategies, operations, etc. to both the internal and external clientele [41]. Through internal accountability, tertiary institutions have a commitment to account for their clientele [42]. It's important to note that external accountability mirrors at the overall performance of the tertiary institutions. In this case much emphasis is given to productivity, aligning individuals' work with the mission and the quality of the education system. This indulges tertiary institutions into push for the attainment of set goals in accordance with the legislated procedures and mechanisms. It is against these standards and regulations that regulatory bodies e.g., ZIMCHE or Department of Quality Assurance and Standards (QAS) - Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development use to monitor operations in both private and public tertiary institutions [43]. This ensures that clients have access to and equal opportunities for quality products and services [44].

It is against this background that accountability calls for tertiary institutions to be answerable to their internal and external clientele, in terms of outcomes or performance [45, 46]. In Zimbabwe's tertiary education quality issues are addressed through accreditation, programme review, and assessment. For instance, ZIMCHE and QAS have the mandated to accredit institutions and programmes; assess qualifications; establish criteria and procedures for monitoring; and evaluating quality of operations in institutions [47]. This serves to validate an institution or a programme's extent of meeting the set quality standards [48]. On the other hand, programme review is seen as an internal function undertaken after a given period as specified by the guidelines [49]. This is grounded in much clearer and more transparent horizontal lines of decision-making in tertiary institutions' structures and operations [50]. Thus, each tertiary institution has the responsibility to design and implement its own internal quality assurance modus operandi guided by defined objectives [51, 52]. Therefore, a quality assurance system should be geared towards generating information about how institutions and their administrative departments/sections have thrived in their operations [53].

The information around the outcomes is communicated to the management, students, and human capital to enhance public confidence and trust in the quality of education. It is significant to acknowledge that external quality assurance leans towards reinforcing the sense of accountability for tertiary institutions' continuous improvement [54]. This is done when agencies (i.e., ZIMCHE or QAS) conduct audits targeted at assessing the extent to which institutions have achieved their objectives; establish whether or not their processes are effective. Through this, the system is expected to capture an array of indicators (i.e., both qualitative and quantitative) to make available comment concerning improvement to made on the programme(s) [55]. In addition, reports are made against a specified set of indicators of quality in education as outlined in ZIMCHE Act (Chapter 25:27) Sections 8, 9, and 10 and Manpower Act (Chapter 28:02) for universities and polytechnics respectively [56].

It is important to note that assessment emphasizes on outcomes, encompasses a narrower set of actions (than programme review), and is generally nonstop rather than interrupted [57]. Thus, the interaction between the internal and external quality assurance systems creates a network system in a complex tertiary education landscape through the provision of answers to the questions about who should be accountable and what level [58]. This brings to light that in tertiary education's structures and operations, accountability and continuous improvement are intimate, as accountability can always be re-articulated to focus on quality improvement [59]. Nevertheless, this calls for partnership of all those involved in tertiary education based on public interest and trust [60]. It's crucial to acknowledge that though there is an agreement amongst the stakeholders concerning the relevance of quality in tertiary education. However, consensus is yet to be reached on its conceptualization.

Therefore, quality in tertiary education can be conceptualized differently depending on the context, for instance as a measure for excellence, perfection, value for money, customer satisfaction, fitness for purpose or change in students. This can be acknowledged as a pathway through which tertiary institutions transit in pursuit of producing goods and services that meet the expectations of the society. In this context, stakeholders (government, institutional leadership, students, industry, academic or non-academic staff, professions, etc) conceptualize quality in education differently based on their interests. However, all these stakeholders have similar expectations, that is tertiary education should produce students who are functional in their society. This brings to the fore-front the need for both public and private tertiary institutions to have quality assurance practices in place. These can be an effective instrument in helping tertiary institutions to accomplish quality product and service from the stakeholders' perspective. This also, has the potential to create a new quality 'life style' of the products and services from these tertiary institutions. This means that fostering of quality in tertiary education is expected to surpass the intangible and mechanical tasks of those involved in the organisational operations. In other words, it's expected to create an environment that also addresses moral and ethical aspects of quality in tertiary education.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is indisputable that the existence of a quality culture fosters a greater linkage between the components of tertiary institutions. Therefore, institutions need to have their quality assurance policies and guidelines under the purview of a quality assurance directorate. Moreso, the directorate operates in accordance with the dictates of the national tertiary education quality assurance and standards policies (i.e., ZIMCHE Act (Chapter 25:27) Sections 8, 9, and 10 and Manpower Act (Chapter 28:02), in as far as what should be offered and to what extent it can be practiced. This brings to existence an appropriate quality assurance system to oversee the education and training structures with emphasis on the learning environment, curriculum and instruction, research output, etc. This forms the foundation that ensures the existence of checks-and-balance within the tertiary education systems. Thus, this discussion, revealed that Zimbabwe's tertiary education quality assurance system comprises components (i.e., internal and external quality assurance, accreditation, accountability, and continuous improvement), which are closely interconnected. This creates a sustainable network capable of transforming tertiary education system's structures and operations to be efficient market-oriented and profitable. It is suggested that although systems to the adherence to set standards and procedures are in place, there is still a need to adopt a quality culture in line with the demands of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Base Education 5.0 curriculum framework.

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