

## **Scope of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Programmes and Projects**

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### **Abstract**

In the face of massification and globalisation, the quality of higher education is so severely threatened that everyone now appears to accept that quality assurance is part and parcel of modern higher education. Issues of accountability, authority and responsibility are paramount when responding, not only to industry bodies but also to the transnational provision of higher education, and to the use of market mechanisms. As higher education institutions control their own systems and processes, the question of the three ‘Ts’ “truth,” “transparency” and “trust” should be renewed. This chapter renders a description of quality, quality assurance and its relevance, and highlights the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments if higher education is to increase public confidence and understanding of its achievements in all programmes and projects. Ultimately, the paper observes that it is not easily possible and desirable to have a single quality assurance frame work that fits all provisions since quality assurance is broad and in addition requires ethical management, time, capacity, and finances.

**Key words:** *Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Scope*

### **Introduction and background**

Quality has always been a tenet that society has strived for since ancient human civilization (Mooney, 2013). According to Quevauviller (2009), the concept of quality can derive back as far as specifications for buildings in ancient Greece as well as building the pyramids in Egypt. . Goods would be inspected by other guild masters to ensure that a standard of quality was maintained by members within the guild. As the world changed, the Industrial Revolution started the modern ideology of quality assurance borrowing the methods prescribed by Frederick Winslow Taylor, a scientific management theorists, whose ideas pushed the methods of efficiency and productivity in manufacturing (Yanli, 2016). The immediate foregoing author asserts that these methods included training employees rather than having them train themselves, implementing and enforcing stringent documentation and protocol based on scientific study, and dispersing work equally among workers and managers.

To date, the means by which business/service providers differentiate themselves from their competitors is through quality maintenance which has remained the most important attribute that creates value about the product/service for the receiver (Baird, 2013). Accordingly, winning companies are those that meet quality standards and for whom customer services is an obsession in every single market in which they operate (Harvey, 2002). Therefore relative terms such as “better”, “superior”, “acceptable” are applied to judge quality; and that since businesses are leaders in quality assurance, non-business organisations such as higher educational institutions are here to benefit from the important lessons learnt by business (Baird, 2013). The truism heretofore is that quality is an inexhaustibly on-going programme and project in an institution of higher learning just as in any other public-sector organisation.

Quality institutions succeed because they are truthful, and there is transparency in verifying that truth; together, this breeds trust as a one value central to any institution and anyone involved (Rosengard & Karen, 2015). So when information reflects badly on a college or a university, there is often an effort to bury that truth, lest parents or new students learn of it; and – note that if they lose the trust of the customers and the public – their faculties, officials, students, and sometimes their jobs are at risk.

Adjacently, Baver (2011) believed that at the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement; and that when taken together, these create trust in the higher education institution’s performance. Yet Middlehurst (2013) realized that a successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the institution’s activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement).

Still, engagement with quality assurance processes allows higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provisions (Kimula, Yonezawa & Ohmori, 2014). So quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus inter-related. They can support the development of a quality culture that is embraced by all: from the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management. For, it is vastly better that institutions of higher learning, rather than outsiders, control their own systems and processes through proper mechanisms (Vasconcellos, 2010).

### **Quality defined**

In amity with the suggestion of Watty (2008) that the dimension of quality as perfection can be removed, since higher education does not aim to produce defect-free graduates, William, Lao & Materu (2010) hold that “fitness for purpose” and “transformation” seem to be the two most appropriate definitions of quality. The stance of the trio was a result of a small-scale research with a sample of senior managers in higher education institutions. However, Harvey and Green (2005) identify five categories or ways of thinking about quality. As cited in Watty (2003), key aspects of each of these categories can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Exception: distinctive, embodies in excellence, passing a minimum set of standards.
- 2) Perfection: zero defects, getting things right the first time (focus on process as opposed to inputs and outputs).
- 3) Fitness for purpose: relates quality to a purpose, defined by the provider.
- 4) Value for money: a focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs.
- 5) Transformation: a qualitative change; education is about doing something to the student as opposed to something for the consumer. This includes concepts of enhancing and empowering: democratisation of the process, not just outcomes.

Diagrammatically, the above key aspects in the definition of quality can be summarized as given below.

#### Definitions for quality

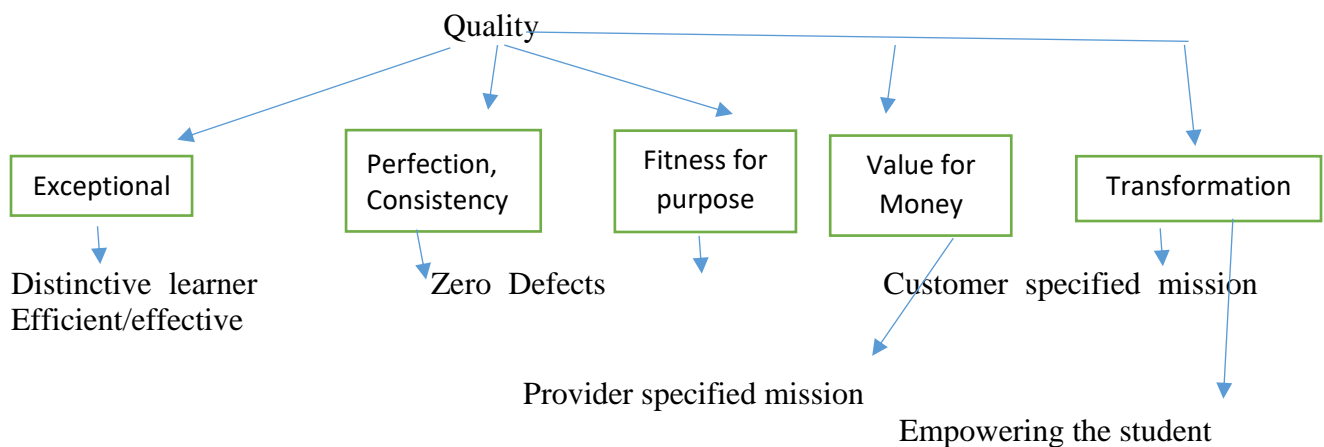


Fig. 1. Definitions of Quality. Source: Watty, 2003.

In fact, whatever programme or project in an educational institution should be first and foremost focused towards satisfaction of the customer – the premier customer being the student.

#### **QA defined**

UNESCO (2012) defines quality assurance (QA) as the means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced. QA also refers to “systematic, structured and continuous process and attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement” (Woodhouse, 2009). Yet according to Horsburgh (2009), QA is the planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not

acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced.

Reasons as to why QA is required in Higher Education (HE) are outlined by Mayunga (2010) as follows:

- a) All academics want to train graduates who meet the needs of society.
- b) That Higher Education Institutions like to deliver a “product” that is wanted and also like to be proud of its graduates.
- c) The labour market expects higher education institutions to provide the students with adequate knowledge, skills and attitude important for the right job fulfilment.
- d) Internationalization of the profession and a world that is becoming a global village brings us greater competition than before. A university not only has to compete inside the country, but also with other countries, not only in East Africa but also worldwide.
- e) Globalisation not only has negative aspects, but also positive ones. It offers graduates the opportunity to enter the world market, but under the condition that the degree qualifications have quality.
- f) There is need for “consumer protection”: our students and their parents are spending a lot of time in and money on their education. Therefore, they have the right to receive quality education.
- g) In the 1950s and 1960s, the nature of higher education especially in the developed countries underwent significant changes. The elite university changed into an institute of mass higher education. More and more students were being enrolled in higher education, and so creating pressure on national budgets. Expenditure per student became much lower, but the government had to assure society that this did not endanger quality. This problem was aggravated by economic recessions. On behalf of society, governments wanted a better insight into the costs and benefits of higher education. Higher education, in their view, cost too much or was not efficient enough.
- h) The relationship between higher education (HE) and society changed. Society became increasingly interested in higher education. Also the relationship between higher education and the labour market became a topic for discussion. Some disciplines, for example social sciences, psychology and history, have a lot of students, but few available jobs. Other disciplines like engineering often had a shortage of students, and society could use more graduates. Such a situation cause pressure on higher education to steer the student flow in the desired direction.
- i) Quality has become increasingly important for higher education institutions, because of the question as to whether it is still possible to deliver the same quality within the given frameworks.

Yanli (2016) epitomizes that one needs to note that a sustainable quality assurance programme enhances employment opportunities, improves the education and training of future employees, harnesses future leaders, facilitates an enabling learning environment, and enriches the academic

and intellectual landscape. Thus it fuels the engine of economic and social development at the national, regional and international levels.

The last reason as it were presupposes that an institution has to engender programmes and projects and should at the same time endeavour to remain relevant and as such match the signs of the timers.

### **QA Scope in HE**

Yanli (2016) illustrates the scope of QA as depicted in the following diagram:



Fig. 2. Scope of Quality Assurance. Source: Yanli (2016).

Bauer (2008) perceives that while institutions design policies for quality assurance that are made public and form part of their strategic management, the purpose, scope and focus of quality assurance is viewed differently by different constituencies such as students, agencies, employees, professional associations, fellow institutions and governments. Therefore internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

The chapter subscribes to the foregoing and underlines the cardinal importance of external stakeholders. These, *inter alia*, determine the market. Moreover, HE should orient her programmes and projects to being “market-driven”.

According to Kells (2010), the word scope means the extent of the area or subject matter that something deals with or to which it is relevant. Herewith, the scope of QA encompasses the area or subject matter that quality assurance practices deals with or to which the practices are relevant and are attesting to the overall aim of programmes and projects in HE. McAllister (2016) adds that the scope helps in covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education such as; corporate governance; academic governance; university management; learning, teaching and research environment; student learning experience; student support and scholarship; external engagement and environment; and university information, communications, marketing and promotion.

For the purposes of this work, the scope of the term quality assurance, as for higher education, will be taken to include the dimensions as given by Kimula, Yonezawa and Ohmori (2014). These are: Regulation (Governance, definition of responsibilities, accountabilities, admission, completion procedures, financial managements and legal frameworks); Academic standards and quality; Educational processes (admissions, registration or enrollment, curriculum design, delivery and support for learning and assessment); Curriculum design and content (validation and approval frameworks, levels and standards); Learning experiences (consumer protection, student experiences, complaints and appeals); Provision of information; financial sustainability; and Outcomes (qualifications, certificates, transcripts and diploma supplements, security, transferability, recognition, currency and value).

While this chapter is purposively not indulging in the discussion on educational processes it is imperative to intimate that the HE sector is going through a period of great change fundamentally altering the relationships between students, Government, funding, and the private sector (Stein, 2015). More freedoms for institutions and more dynamic markets for Higher Education mean a greater risk of universities failing – without the correct regulatory architecture in place (Kelly, 2013). So in order to avoid the “unthinkables” that will threaten quality (Vasconcellos, 2010), or prevent the higher education system from breaking; and while not necessarily following the order as in the foregoing paragraph, there is need to first construe “regulation”. This regulation could be in Governance, responsibilities, accountabilities, admission, completion procedures, financial managements and legal frameworks. This of course is without prejudice to the existential need to constantly change in the focus on programmes and projects of HE

## **Regulation**

Merriam-Webster (2014) defines regulation as an official rule or law that says how something should be done. While Alvesson & Willmott (2010) regard it as a kind of policy making that uses a range of rule based tools for achieving public policy aims (rather than relying more on

legislation from the centre). Stein (2015) relatedly supports that in regulation, standards for behaviors are set and decisions on sanctions are taken by arm length bodies or offices. Therefore this regulation is a less political and more technocratic form of governance; for example placing power where it should be especially with those who best fit in different positions. Mayunga (2010) proposed that setting rules and standards is only one function of riding to a quality environment; adding that most importantly is how the rules are complied with and enforced and whether persuasion of the threat of punishment becomes the chief method in achieving behavior change.

The view of the foregoing scholar is in line with Kell (2012) who categorises that compliance to rules and standards enables the higher education institution to protect its global reputation, its financial, and personal interest of students. Although regulation requires compliance, Lee & Harley (2014) alert that university managers should take note that good regulation is not simply about compliance and protection but it has a more developmental connotation and must be taken into account when deciding upon the best regulatory environment. In fact, Alvesson & Willmott (2010) heighten that regulation should involve encouraging continuous improvement and the transposition of innovatory and best practices among those being regulated, not simply compliance with threshold standards.

In assuring quality of higher education, Stein (2015) proposed that setting good regulation is necessary to:

- a) Protect the student's interests and their investments
- b) Ensure proper oversight and management of public funding
- c) Protect national and global reputation of the university
- d) Facilitate appropriate institutional autonomy, academic freedom and fair access
- e) Sustain the standards and quality of higher education more generally
- f) Strong business case – encourage businesses and other investments.
- g) To enhance excellence across providers

In fact, one of the classical Latin statements is: "*Qui regula vivit, Dei vivit*". Literally translated as "He who lives according to the law lives according to God".

Knight (2001) envisions several different facets therein the regulation of higher education. These include – and are not limited to – self- regulation, co-regulation and regulation by independent bodies. However, observations from Harvey & Newton (2004) contend that the current framework for regulation by independent bodies (hereafter referred to as the 'regulatory framework') and the landscape in which higher education operates is complex. Following the argument of Harvey & Newton's (2004), Adams (2015) observed that external regulatory bodies cause tension to higher education. Therefore, higher education institutions need to consult their regulatory bodies or mother ministries for proper guidance in how the element of regulation would be employed to assure quality. For example in Uganda, higher education institutions are protected by the Mission of National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) which is to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary education institutions in Uganda create, sustain and provide relevant and quality higher education for all qualified

Ugandans and to meet the local, national and global higher education challenges of the future (NCHE Report, 2012).

### **Academic standards and quality**

McAllister (2016) defines academic standards as the standards that individual degree-awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications. Jones (2012) rounds off that academic standards represent the level of achievement a student has to reach to gain an academic award such as a certificate, a diploma or a first class honors, second class honors, or third class honors degree classification in a particular subject or the award of merit or distinction in a master's degree or in a doctorate. Yet, Academic quality is how well the learning opportunities are made available to students to enable them to achieve their award (Woodhouse, 2009). In the words of Aitken (2015), academic quality is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for students.

In exercising this responsibility, Santangelo & Tomlinson (2009) state that the University ensures that its academic standards are at least as high as those in comparable institutions and do match external competition. This heightens the perception of Jones (2012), the quality of academics should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose. Understandably therefore, these academic programmes are at the core of the higher education institutions' teaching mission as they provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable; which fact may influence a student's personal development and may be applied in their future careers. The foregoing catapults that in maintaining academic programs, quality enhancement should be employed to take deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students (Aitken, 2015). This means that the university ought to be committed to reviewing its activities systematically to see whether it can identify features of current practice that can be improved upon (Brown & Glasner, 2011). As intimated by William, Lao & Materu (2010), the university also systematically looks ahead considering 'where it wants to be' and taking the necessary steps to ensure it gets there. On their part, Academic Programmes should also be designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and should have explicit intended learning outcomes (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009). In the prompting of Karge, Phillips, Jesse & McCabe (2011), students and other stakeholders should be involved in designing the courses and / or programmes which in turn should enable smooth student progression and define the expected student workload and reflect the four purposes of higher education while subject to a formal institutional approval process. To maintain academic standards, Marshall & Rossman (2010) assert that the university is responsible for assuring itself that the quality of the learning opportunities provided for its students enables them to meet the standards of the awards for which they are studying. Accordingly, the university should endeavour to enhance the quality of the student learning experience by reviewing its systems and the information generated, while ensuring that her processes for the management of academic quality and standards are fit for purpose. In fact, according to the subtle mind of Lomas (2015), sound processes produce quality products (Lomas, 2015).



The quality and commitment of staff, as given by Minter (2011), are critical to maintaining and enhancing the high quality of learning and teaching. Here, the University fully recognises that all staff, both academic and support, are continuously reflecting upon and seeking to improve practice in all areas of work to advance learning and teaching and research in their disciplines and the quality of the student learning experience. Adjacently, Josset-Bass, Sharan & Sharan (2012) propagate the importance of engaging students in the assurance and enhancement of academic quality if universities are to exhibit themselves as committed to providing a high quality learning experience. This is supported by Josephs (2013) that the direct contribution students make through providing feedback, advice and suggestions is critical in all quality enhancement and assurance processes.

Tomlisson (2005), Vygotsky (2009), Minter (2011), & McAllister (2016) advance guiding principles which the university should advance in her approach to academic standards, quality enhancement and quality assurance. These principles are:-

- a) Completeness: where Quality processes apply to all University provision in learning and teaching that is credit-rated – including collaborative programmes with other institutions – and the learning experience of all students is systematically considered and reflected upon regularly and periodically.
- b) Coherence: where the components of the Quality Framework are inter-related and act to draw together diverse individuals and information in a coherent and holistic review of quality.
- c) Objectivity: where institution-led quality processes are informed by the views and input of external experts and bodies.
- d) Efficiency and enhancement: where the components of the Academic Quality Framework are designed to ensure rigorous interrogation of academic standards and enhancement of academic quality while meeting the needs of academic staff and minimising the impact on workload.

The University's procedures for the design and approval of new courses and programmes exist to ensure academic standards are set at the appropriate level (Minter, 2011). In the same way, Temple, Callender & Lyn (2014) support that the University's excellent reputation relies on setting quality academic standards and, therefore, it is essential that these procedures are both robust and effective. Equidistantly, Jeremeh (2011) maintains that for proper management of academic standards and quality, key stakeholders such as Students, External Examiners and Employers, Professional / Statutory / Regulatory Bodies and Industrial / Professional Partners, where appropriate take part in consideration of proposals and consultations to provide externality and objectivity: Once the proposal is marketable and fits with existing provision, it can then be resourced.

## **Provision of information**

Information refers to facts about a situation, person or event. It is accurate and timely data, specific and organized for a purpose. It is also knowledge that one gets about someone or something: facts or details about a subject; it is knowledge acquired through experience or study. Information is therefore of benefit to everyone with an interest in higher education to the effect that the debate about higher education purposes and value should be conducted in a transparent and inclusive way (Kelly, 2013). Attila (2011) proposes that some of higher education information is of direct interest to the public at large and should be accessible to and retrievable by anyone; and that other information may be of a more specialised, detailed nature and relevant to more limited audiences, such as prospective or current students or those who have completed their studies. In maintaining this, universities have a responsibility of publishing highly recognised, impartial and objective information. The foregoing is in line with the notion of Kelly, (2013) according to whom information should be made available, valid, reliable, useful and accessible.

Information about HE Provision represents and respects the autonomy of higher education providers (Kelly, 2015). The differences in mission, size, organisational structure, range of provision and the nature of the student body determines a provider's intended audiences and the preferred means of communicating information. Such quality of the information should be examined to fit-for-purpose and should ultimately be accessible and trustworthy. It is this trustworthiness that promotes public confidence and assurance relying on public understanding of the achievements made by universities – such achievements as research and innovations, publications, admissions, awards, courses, management structures, qualifications, and internal and external connections (Attila, 2011) This is supported by Lomas (2015) who suggests that one of the ways in which such confidence can be promoted is by higher education producing appropriate information about the learning opportunities and other activities on offer. Kelly (2015) is more succinct that the following purposes should be structured around the provision of information in higher education, namely:

- a) To communicate the purposes and value of higher education to the public at large
- b) To help prospective students make informed decisions about where, what, when and how they will study to enable current students to make the most of their higher education learning opportunities
- c) To confirm the achievements of students on completion of their studies
- d) To safeguard academic standards and assure and enhance academic quality.

The immediate quoted scholar advises that given these purposes, it is proper that not all information about higher education provision can be in the public domain, but that certain information is signposted in a targeted fashion. For example, universities publish information to help prospective students select their programme of study with an understanding of the academic environment in which they will be studying and the provision that will be made to enable their development and achievement. Therefore, Kelly (2015) signals a requirement for higher education institutions to provide information about their activities, including the

programmes they offer and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information.

Basing on global competition, Watty (2008) clarified that for universities to fit globally they should set a quality information flow and management process to determine and accomplish the standard of institutional quality service. This, according to him, should be done consistently and continuously to satisfy all stakeholders (students, parents, workforce, government, lecturers, supporting staff and other related parties).

As a matter of course, information on institutions' activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public. Prospective students need to arrive at an informed decision about the programme they select while feeling confident that they are choosing a university that will give them a conducive learning environment. Indicative information about the nature and design of the curriculum provides an overview of likely opportunities to develop transferable skills of the teaching, supervision, learning and assessment methods students can expect on their programmes, and of the resources and facilities available to enable and enhance their learning. There should be provision of information on continuous arrangements for pastoral care, accommodation, and social and leisure facilities available to students. Information about university connections with industry, business and the professions, links with professionals, statutory and regulatory bodies, as well as employers should also be availed (Attila, 2011; Karge, Phillips, Jessee, & McCabe, 2011); McAllister, 2016). New students need information about relevant and applicable academic frameworks and regulations, alumni services, careers advice, and opportunities for further study.

Information is therefore a lubricant for the smooth running of any organisation.

### **Financial sustainability**

Increased competition in both international and national markets for educational services; the growth of informational openness of higher education establishments, and the enhanced role of strategic planning have led to economic reforms in higher education (Yorke, 2014). Concerns have been towards the efficiency of the activities of educational institutions. All these aspects are gradually leading to a new objective that faces higher education establishments which is a necessity to demonstrate the efficiency of their education services and support it with definite indices. The key-note behind is financial sustainability (Yorke, 2014).

Financial sustainability according to Lee & Harley (2014) refers to ability of a university to manage its finances so as to meet its spending commitments, both now and in the future. It also refers to an institution's capacity to obtain revenues in response to demand in order to sustain productive processes at a steady or growing rate to produce results and to obtain a surplus

(Yorke, 2014). In general, financial sustainability ensures that future generations of students do not face an unmanageable bill of services provided to the current generation.

Achieving institutional financial sustainability is a goal that every university strives for. Theoretically, this financial sustainability will, in the view of Bauer (2008), enable the university to cover its administrative costs and to prioritize its activities so as to accomplish its missions without undergoing interminable negotiations with donors who may or may not agree with the vision or with the cost percentages. The findings of Lee & Harley (2014) state that the percentage of organisations that achieve financial sustainability has remained very low. The co-authors attribute this not to a lack of creativity or commitment, but rather to the fact that many institutions continue to have a student-dependent vision. While institutions want to generate a lot of income and improve on their quality, Paquita (2013) advises that it is imperative that universities know the minimum they must raise to achieve the proposed objectives related to fulfilling the respective missions and covering administrative and quality costs.

In managing the assurance of financial sustainability, Lee & Harley (2014) gave the following indicators to be employed and which, in the co-authors' analysis, are learnings from organisations that have managed to achieve financial sustainability to some extent and the paths to success. These are:

- a) Developing and maintaining strong stakeholder relationships, including beneficiaries, staff, and donors
- b) Obtaining a range of types of funding, including unrestricted funds
- c) Building financial reserves
- d) Assessing and managing risks, and
- e) Strategically managing and financing overhead costs

Although it may seem obvious, universities have to learn through experience to employ efficient procedures for administration and finances, and fiscal planning in conjunction with strategic planning (Leon, 2015). Paquita (2013) compares employment of efficient procedures to a table of four legs in order to stand steadily. These four legs, referred to as 'pillars for the financial sustainability', are:

- a) Strategic and financial planning
- b) Income diversification
- c) Sound administration and finance
- d) Own income generation.

Leon (2015) posits that strategic planning is the mechanism to help clarify an organisation's mission and objectives as well as prioritize the actions needed to accomplish them. In this case a financial plan of action is drafted basically consisting of projected expenditure and the universities' potential to generate the income to cover the expenditure (Paquita, 2013). Although it may appear that a financial plan is very similar to a budget, there are significant differences between the two. As Lee & Harley (2014) would argue, a financial plan is a dynamic document

that changes frequently. So the ultimate purpose of this financial plan is to determine if the organisation will have sufficient resources available in the medium term to meet the objectives described in the strategic plan.

The second pillar, income diversification, refers not only to internal income generation, but also to the number of income sources that provide a universities main funding. Paquita (2013) adds that even if an organisation has twenty donors, it will remain extremely vulnerable if a large portion of the budget depends on only one of these. Any change in this donor's decision can induce a major crisis.

Sound Administration and Finance, the third pillar, involves knowing how to manage university resources. This is essential to achieving financial sustainability as knowing how to generate income. Efficient procedures for administration and finances are governed by a series of institutional policies that help universities make the most of its resources and ensure transparency in fiscal management. Moreover, these procedures enable universities to anticipate their financial standing and ultimately make appropriate decisions in a timely manner. Efficient procedures allow universities to generate income through the financial management of available assets. For example accounting procedures regardless of their scope and structure must record the universities transactions to enable visualize the university and meet its needs.

The forth pillar is the university's own income generation plans. This as such is one way for a university to diversify her sources of revenue. And, the university, not the donor, decides how to spend this income like, according to Leon (2015), contributions to a trust or endowment fund.

Notwithstanding, Leon (2015) observed that financial sustainability so far is one of the key challenges for big organisations like universities, and it has played part in delayed quality management procedures. To Paquita (2013), only those institutions that have sound financial structures and stable income will be able to fulfil their multiple missions and respond to the current challenges in an increasingly complex and global environment. Indeed, financial sustainability is not an end in itself; it aims to ensure that university's goals are reached by guaranteeing that the institution produces sufficient income to enable it to invest in its future academic and research activities (Yorke, 2014). Income diversification is a tool to achieve these goals if the conditions in which the universities operate allow and require it while taking account of the diverse contexts (Yorke, 2014).

### **Curriculum design and content**

A curriculum is a planned sequence of learning experiences (Jeremy, 2011). In higher education, curriculum design aims to address the need for 'rounded' graduates, with subject knowledge and a range of essential attributes for work and life in a complex rapidly changing world (Toohey, 2014). Curriculum design further entails strategic and creative rethinking of traditional approaches to curriculum to embed a clear focus on learning outcomes that develop these attributes. According to Hinett & Thomas (2009), curriculum design can be enhanced

through: engagement, enhancement events, research, frameworks, and providing toolkits. Laurillard, (2013) rules that in designing a curriculum, for a course, programme or content for a particular unit, planners should note that they are planning an intellectual 'journey' for students -- a series of experiences that will result in learning what planners have provided. He asserts that for assurance of quality, the managers should ensure that the curriculum is accessible and inclusively considering the aims, intended learning outcomes, syllabus, learning and teaching methods, and assessment. In fact, he presupposes that the aims of the curriculum are the reasons for undertaking the learning 'journey' -- its overall purpose or rationale. These stated aims of a curriculum tell students what the result of studying it is likely to be. This is one way of assuring quality.

Learning outcomes are what students will acquire if they follow the curriculum successfully; for instance, when students, having completed the programme or unit, do pass the assessment (Fry, Ketteridge & Mashall, 2011). At times the public looks at intended learning outcomes as the anticipated fruits of completing the planned journey. So in assurance of its quality, the learning outcomes can be framed as a good practice to express each outcome in terms of what successful students will be able to do. For example, rather than stating 'students will understand why....' planners would say 'students will be able to summarize the main reasons why...' (Ramsden, 2010). Therefore this helps students to focus on what they expect to achieve and it assists one in devising appropriate assessment tasks.

The syllabus is the 'content' of the programme or unit; hence, the topics, issues or subjects that will be covered. In selecting the content for inclusion, Aminen (2011) rules that the following should be borne in mind: the syllabus should be relevant to the outcomes of the curriculum; the syllabus should be appropriate to the level of the programme or course unit; the syllabus should be up to date and, if possible, should reflect current research.

Learning and teaching methods are the means by which students will engage with the syllabus; for example through lectures, laboratory classes and fieldwork (Phillip, 2015). The overall emphasis should be on learning and the ways it can be helped to occur. The immediate quoted scholar gives examples of learning and teaching methods that could be employed in assurance of quality; and these are:

- a) Individual study is an important element in the university curriculum and which should be planned with the same care as other forms of learning.
- b) Group learning is also important. Students learn from each other in ways that they cannot learn alone. The inclusion of group projects and activities can considerably enhance the curriculum.
- c) Online learning is increasingly important in many curricula and needs to be planned carefully if it is to make an effective contribution. Online materials can be a valuable support for learning and can be designed to include helpful self-assessment tasks.

In regard to assessment, Fry, Ketteridge & Mashall (2011) ascertain that learning occurs most effectively when a student receives feedback; for example, when students receive information on what they have already (and have not yet) earned. Feedback - according to Temple, Callender & Lyn (2014), Toohey (2014), and McAllister (2016) – has three main forms:

- a) Self-assessment, through which a student learns to monitor and evaluate their own learning.
- b) Peer assessment, in which students provide feedback on each other's learning. This can be viewed as an extension of self-assessment and presupposes trust and mutual respect. Research suggests that students can learn to judge each other's work as reliably as staff.
- c) And staff assessment, in which a member of staff or teaching assistant provides commentary and feedback on the student's work.

Brown & Glasner (2011) add that this assessment may be formative (providing feedback to help the student learn more) or summative (expressing a judgment on the student's achievement by reference to stated criteria). However McAllister (2016) insists that students usually learn more by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their work than by knowing the mark or grade given to it.

### **Learning experiences**

Harvey & Green (2005) maintain that the twenty-first century learners are quite different from the students taught fifteen or twenty years by then. Today universities utilise a range of tools, learning management systems and interactive media as important teaching and learning support to supplement and sometimes replace the traditional teaching aids of the past. Since students do not all learn the same thing on the same day in the same way, educators are increasingly faced with the challenge of knowing students well enough to cater to their varying needs in the classroom (Fry, Ketteridge & Mashall, 2011). One way to accomplish this is by exploring differentiated instructional strategies to enhance student learning experiences (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009).

Attempting to implement differentiated instruction, therefore, is a new approach to teaching and learning at international higher education institutions as well as institutions of higher learning in the Caribbean region; for instance. This predicament is holds water even in our locale. Tomlinson (2005) describes differentiated instruction as a deliberate and conscious method of planning and teaching to address student variance. According to Laurillard (2013) and Phillip (2015), the student's experience and needs are always high on the agenda for any educational establishment. According to Aminen (2011), a word of mouth plays a big part in the marketing of any product and education is no different. So if students don't have a positive and enjoyable experience, which they believe meets their needs and offers value for money, a college or university is likely to notice a fall in applicants and reputation (Ramsden, 2010). In amity with

the foregoing, students learning experience is defined as the totality of a student's interaction with the institution.

Supporting and enhancing the 'student experience' throughout the student lifecycle (from first contact to ultimately becoming an alumnus) is critical to the success in higher education today for both the student and the institution (Brown & Glasner, 2011). The student experience encompasses all aspects of student life (such as academic, social, welfare and support) with the academic imperative at the heart of it (Ramsden, 2010). Therefore higher education institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach. Accordingly, the implementation of student-centred learning and teaching respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths; considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate; flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods; encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher; promotes mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship; has appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints ( Fry, Ketteridge & Mashall, 2011). Adjacently, Knight (2005) holds that the teacher's role is essential not only in creating a high quality student experience but also in enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences and skills.

Meanwhile, *Outcomes* are also areas where quality must be assured, and this process could look at qualifications, certificates, transcripts and diploma supplements, security, transferability and recognition) as areas of concern for higher education institutions if they are to continue and raise meaning to the public (Bauer, 2008). According to Merriam-Webster (2014), the term outcomes refers to something that happens as a result of an activity or process. With higher education, the term construes the quality, confidence and commitment that the public defines to a University. Within the selfsame ambit, Vasconcellos (2010) perceives that in order to ensure outcomes it is incumbent upon the institutions of higher learning, rather than outsiders, to control their own systems and processes through proper mechanisms, so that no room for doubt is entertained by the customers.

### **Concluding remarks**

Complexity and diversity of quality provision raises the question as to whether it is possible to have a single QA frame-work that fits all provision. This is also owing to the latitude that QA is broad and also requires ethical management, capacity, time and money. Suffice to emphasize heretofore that the scope and purpose of quality assurance is defined differently by different stakeholders such as students, agencies, employees, professional associations, fellow institutions and governments (Bauer, 2008). Meanwhile, accountability represents the ethical and managerial obligation to report on their activities and results, explains their performance, and assume the responsibility for unmet expectations (William, Lao & Materu, 2010). In practice, it is the clear assignment of responsibility for efficient use of resources to produce results and the mechanisms whereby this quality can be monitored. These mechanisms often take the form of stakeholder representation in



decision-making bodies, external evaluation by impartial experts, and publicly available reports on activities and accomplishments. On balance, universities should introduce mechanisms that constitute feedback loops that enable decision makers at various levels to receive evaluative information regarding its performance so that appropriate adjustments can be made in a timely manner.

This chapter surmises that what has been spelt out in the foregoing pages is but only an iota; for, the scope of QA is indefinite and, in the selfsame perception of Neema-Abooki (2016), it carries with it a QUEST imperative; that is, an analysis of quality in every single task.

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