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A Construal of the Understanding Level of Quality Assurance by Internal Stakeholders in Two Malaysian Universities

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A Construal of the Understanding Level of Quality Assurance by Internal Stakeholders in Two Malaysian Universities

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Abstract

The "understanding" in terms of interpretation of quality assurance is essential for the acceptance, theorizing and the practical application of the methods proposed by it. A great deal of research papers have often pointed to the lack of understanding, among others, as the reason behind the inadequate nature of implementing quality assurance in higher education institutes. This paper examines the "understanding" levels of two key stakeholders in terms of the meaning they make out of the policy pronouncements on quality. It utilizes the qualitative case study scheme to provoke the thoughts of mainly the academic staff and their administrative counterparts in two public universities. The findings reveal that there exist differences which are mainly grounded on their role and experience in the scope of understanding the purposes served by quality, and the depths of quality management fulfillment among the two categories of stakeholders. This underpins the value of clarifying the philosophy of quality assurance to stakeholders and their involvement for better understanding and ownership.

Keywords: quality assurance, academic staff, stakeholders, public universities, qualitative methodology

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Una Conceptualización sobre el Nivel de Comprensión de la Garantía de Calidad de las Partes Interesadas Internas en dos Universidades de Malasia

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Resumen

La "comprensión" en cuanto a la interpretación de la garantía de calidad es esencial para la aceptación, la teorización y la aplicación práctica de los métodos propuestos por ella. Una gran cantidad de trabajos de investigación han señalado la falta de comprensión, entre otros, como la razón de la inadecuada aplicación de la garantía de calidad en los institutos de educación superior. Este artículo examina los niveles de "comprensión" de dos actores clave en términos del significado que se hace fuera acerca de las declaraciones de política de calidad. Se utiliza el esquema de estudio de caso cualitativo para provocar el pensamiento de todo el personal académico y sus homólogos administrativos en dos universidades públicas. Los resultados revelan que existen diferencias entre las dos categorías de actores, que se basan principalmente en su función y experiencia en cuanto a la comprensión de los efectos atendidos por la calidad y la profundidad de cumplimiento de la gestión de calidad. Esto sostiene la importancia de aclarar la filosofía de aseguramiento de la calidad a las partes interesadas, su implicación y porpiedad para una mejor comprensión.

Palabras clave: garantía de calidad, personal académico, partes interesadas, universidades públicas, metodología cualitativa

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Quality assurance in education is a methodology in the broadest sense of its application to check a process or outcome with different purposes of compliance, control, accountability and improvement (Harvey, 2012). Higher education from the 1990s changed outlook in terms of the intake of its students, the nature of its curriculum and approach to its academic activity among others to match the realities of its environment. As Webb (1994), as quoted by Newton (2002), indicated "all who work in higher education today continue to have to deal, on a day-to-day basis, with the complex interaction between the planned and the serendipitous" (p. 43). A decade after, the higher education scenery is still grappling with some of these changes notable among which is quality assurance and management issues. As asserted by Becket & Brookes (2008) quality has been firmly placed on the higher education agenda in many countries with mostly a top down imposition from the education ministries of countries down to the Universities and tertiary education institutes.

The study of the literature in quality has always expounded the difficultly of rearing quality assurance, whose origins are rooted in industrial settings, in the education ecosystem that has distinctive features of underlying characteristics not as obvious as those that could be found in an industry. This study was conducted with the objective of expounding the understanding levels in terms of the meaning administrative staff and their academic counterparts make out of the policy pronouncements on quality and its actual implementation as experienced. The main research question that guided this study was how quality assurance measures were understood by internal stakeholders in terms of how they are viewed within the framework of their job profiles as it applies to quality.

Systematic quality management originally developed in the manufacturing sector (Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner 2004) and later metamorphosed with flairs from countries like USA and Japan, and hence aspects of both the western and eastern traditions are visibly embed in them (Park-Dahlgaard, 2001). Due to earlier reluctance to use practices from the manufacturing sector (Ehrenberg & Stupak, 1994), the Public sector in general started using systematic quality management only in the 1990s (Vinzant & Vinzant, 1996) with examples of the successful use of such systematic quality management in several public services (Ehrenberg & Stupak, 1994; Lagrosen, 1999, 2000). Despite hurdles of incorporating quality management in other sectors, the higher education arena, distinct by

the nature of its business, stood out as an area where quality struggled hard to take root. The abstract nature of gauging education and learning, academic freedom and its guiding principles, lack of a match between quality management and educational processes (Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003) all contributed to the uneasy marriage of quality within education.

Methodology

Motivated by the need to delve into a study with a profundity to unearth intuitive depths of thought on quality assurance from the two categories of respondents, the qualitative case study method was chosen. According to Yin (2003), and for which reason the case study method was chosen for this study, the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena for the reason that the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events.

Two Public Universities which consist of a research and comprehensive university in Malaysia were selected in the study on grounds that the research and comprehensive university types possess the traits of all other categories of Universities within Malaysia. Such traits included staff and students diversity and a wide array of study disciplines on offer in these universities. Fourteen respondents which comprise three administrators each and four academic staff each of the two universities chosen for the study were interviewed for this study. The interviews lasted between thirty to forty minutes with two subsequent consultations for affirmation of the transcripts by the interviewees and further clarification before codes groupings and categorizations were condensed into themes using the dedoose software. In addition, documents on quality assurance were analyzed as well as observations of the daily activities of the two Universities for five days each as part of the quest for triangulation. The two Universities were labeled X and Y while the respondents were labeled based on university and the category they fall under. Respondents for University X were labeled UX Adm 1 to 3 for admin staff and UX Aca 1 to 4 for academic staff whereas with University Y the respondents were labeled UY Adm 1 to 3 for admin staff and UY Aca 1 to 4 for academic staff.

Main Themes

Differences in Scope of Understanding

Differences in scope of understanding quality assurance among the two categories of staff interviewed as well as within them were a key finding in this research. To the quality assurance officials, who are practically the custodians of quality assurance policies and its implementation protocol, quality assurance systems are packages of change that endure normal routines of lack of understanding and resistance at the initial phases but overtime get understood and accepted. However to the majority of academic staff interviewed in this study quality assurance is not merely a change package that can be applied to a complex phenomenon, as education, without the much needed nurturing and adaptation. The absence of such nurturing with the inputs of the key stakeholders obscure its reason of being and the way it is identified with. In essence therefore two dimensions as regards the scope of understanding emerged:

- Quality for Improvement versus Quality for Accountability
- Intra versus inter University Quality Management fulfillment

Improvement vs accountability

Quality managers are of the view they are addressing quality while the majority of academic staff agree that attempts are being made but with either the wrong strategies or insufficient efforts. Quality managers were insistent that the quality systems they use have contributed manifestly in improvements of various units and sections in the University and gave specific instances to substantiate their position. However the academic staffs while acknowledging that quality assurance system have effected changes cautioned that the nature and circumstances of the change need to be put in context. To them improvement should be looked beyond window dressing to one that leads to impact in the overall design and purpose of the university system which they consider somewhat wanting in their universities.

University "X"

In the case of UX there was some interspersing of responses from both categories of staff. The administrative staff and quality assurance managers generally gave similar versions of improvement brought about as a result of quality assurance initiatives. In the words of UX Adm 2 a positive improvement of quality assurance is the creation of the ability to monitor the task of staff which could not have been done before:

> One good improvement for this faculty is you can monitor what staff are doing because of the forms and because of the on-line system of quality. Before this you cannot do that so at least there is control so that staff do the right thing.

Two of the academic staffs in UX who also had responsibilities of quality assurance in their sectors were also in agreement that the quality assurance led to improvements. UX Aca 1 describes such improvement as follows:

> One great improvement about quality assurance is now everything is organize and coordinated. So all staff can follow and monitor everything this university do.

UX Aca 2 also equally indicated how a great deal has improved as a result of quality assurance thus:

> A lot has improved thanks to the use of quality assurance.

However, UX Aca 4 was incredulous that the quality assurance especially through the medium of ISO as a framework was moot because of the complicated nature of education when compared to the businesses and other service areas for which it was initially designed. He concurred that it plays some role in education but such a role is tilted more towards the accountability role than of improvement. He reflects on these ideas thus in the following excerpt:

> ISO is one quality management system whose relevance has always been questioned in academics. In the services yes but in teaching

> and learning it is just the accountability role it plays but not the improvement role. So because of this doubt the implementation is always done reluctantly and if the implementers do something reluctantly then the results are unsatisfactory.

University "Y"

University UB's two categories of respondents gave differing views of the purposes being served by the quality assurance system. The administrative staff and quality assurance managers were clearly sanguine of the quality assurance system and the strategies being used to implement it. While they recognized that there were challenges of implementation they looked at them as normal issues which are being bettered, further improved and will ultimately achieve the purposes they are set to accomplish.

UY Adm. 1 presents his thoughts on attempts to improve the application process in his unit and how it has improved in the following excerpt:

> Let's say our intake process that is recruiting new students. We started off with when students apply. When we receive the application the student will get the results usually after two months. So our first enhancement was that we bring it down from after two months to one to two months. 80% is from one to two months. Now we are going lower to two weeks to one month.

In similar fashion UY Adm 3 also indicates how they have improved overall citing the areas of teaching, student services and the introduction of publication requirements for all Masters and PhD students:

> You know overall if you look at services offered by this university we have improve a lot. In teaching for example we have improve because we try to merge the methods and also monitor what lecturers do. Before this it was not like that. Also starting from 2008 all Masters with thesis students must publish before they graduate. All this is good for both student, Lecturer and the university. Our student services are also better now you know.

UY Adm 2 also affirmed the improvement achieved as a result of the quality assurance by giving examples of the quick timelines for release of

exam results as opposed to before, the general rapport and treatment of students by staff and in the area of teaching:

> If you look at the system today I think you will agree that we have improve a lot base on the quality assurance we have. Because even if we are not comfortable with them the pressure to improve is there and you have to. So because of this many many things have improve. For example exam results now come out faster than before, students also say they receive better treatment from staff both admin and lecturers than before. Even teaching now lecturers you know students assess them so they try to do better so that students assess them better.

However while the academic staff recognize the efforts being done, identified with its cause and claim to follow the requirements as envisaged by the their faculties and the university, they lamented the strategies used as short of the zest that would have engaged and involved all staff physically and mentally.

UY Aca 3 narrates that he understands the overall framework and the good intentions of his faculty to improve but on close scrutiny he thinks the most important aspects are not addressed, at least to the intended levels:

> I know the overall quality assurance framework, what they want to achieve and how they want staff to do it. I know all that but I think if I look at it overall still the most important aspect is not address. I don't mean they don't have intention to address but just that…. you see… the method they use is not 100% accurate to address the problem.

UY Aca 3 agrees that the quality assurance system is addressing the issues it is created to solve but thinks that problems of quality in general are not being addressed. He cites the creation of quality assurance around the vision, mission and KPI in his university but questions if real quality is being achieved in teaching and improving the quality of their graduates lamenting worryingly that some graduates are now given tests before recruiters have the confidence to hire them:

> Ok if I want to summarize my answer I will say that the quality assurance system is addressing the problems they are created to solve but they are not addressing the problem of quality in general. Ok I know you look confuse but don't worry I will explain. In this university for example we have a vision, mission, faculties have vision and mission and each staff also have KPI so all the quality systems are created around the vision, mission and KPI. Yes so that is why I said that they achieve quality based on that but whether quality is achieved in teaching and improving the quality of graduates I personally don't think so. In fact many times you hear reports that employers now complain about graduates. Even some of them give test before they can have trust to hire students…. I mean graduates.

UY Aca 4 engaged the issue of improvement further by indicating that improvement in quality assurance is an effect that emerges from accountability somewhat as a windfall. She argues that there is too much focus on accountability to a point she doubts if improvement is the primary goal. She cites the emphasis on every small detail in the process of quality assurance especially by the audit unit as an indication of guarding with accountability more in mind:

> I think the purpose is to improve but I think improvement here is just the effect of accountability because you see accountability, maybe, as the most important reason why they are doing quality. I don't mean they don't want to improve but maybe there is too much focus on accountability when you look at the process because for example the audit section aaah they want us to fill all the necessary and unnecessary forms haaa. When they emphasize on every small thing you can see they are more interested in accountability.

It could be realised that both categories of staffs in the case of the two Universities agreed to a greater extent of the presence of a quality assurance system and a working one, in terms of applying the regulations as prescribed in the quality assurance framework, for that matter. None also disputed that some changes have taken place as a result of the quality assurance processes that have taken place. The major divergence was the purpose that the two categories of respondents deduced as the focus of the

quality assurance initiative. The administrators were more aligned to the improvement rationale of the quality assurance system of their respective universities while the majority of respondents on the academic side looked at it as being skewed more towards fulfilling an accountability obligation. In fact academic staffs recognize that changes or rather improvements do take place as a result of the quality assurance system but the zealous concentration on the nature of the implementation indicates that the aim is more geared towards evading liability. Most of these academic staff have been teaching for reasonable periods and would have over these periods had their own thoughts about what constitute improvement.

Quality for improvement versus quality for accountability is not wholly a new phenomenon in the quality literature as scholars have written variously on the matter from different perspectives over the years. Thune (1996) for example expounds on how accountability and quality improvement are often conceived as mutually exclusive goals of evaluation which are based on different methods related to the ownership of the evaluation system. Thune further clarifies improvement by referring to it as self-learning-based procedures that seek to prop up formative evaluation rather judgment based on past performance. On the other hand Thune looks at accountability as having to do with measures based on externally defined aspirations and conditions that intend on amplification of external insight and control, thereby opening the door for eventual external corrective action.

The thrust of the debate surrounding accountability and improvement were, among many others, mostly centered around questions of whether they are mutually exclusive (Thune, 1996), if they can be combined as a balanced strategy (Middlehurst & Woodhouse, 1995) and whether albeit accountability leads to improvement it does not damage learning by diverting academic staffs attention away from the improvement of learning (Harvey & Green, 1993). The accountability vs improvement dimensions in this study were more focused on how the two categories of respondents viewed the purposes that are being served by the quality system. In fact a close look at the responses suggests that none of the two categories disputes the presence of the other aspect. Instead those that believed quality was being done for accountability agreed that improvement could come along the way but only that, even if it does, it should be regarded more as an effect as it was not rigidly sought as a primary goal. To those that believe it

is done for improvement they agreed entirely with the accountability role the whole process plays but would not subscribe to the back-bencher role of improvement in it.

In essence therefore it could be safely argued that the finding about quality vs improvement rationale for quality initiatives plays both the role of confirmatory as well as innovative significance. Its confirmatory significance emanates from its position of reinforcing the continuing debate of the accountability vs improvement discuss while the innovative significance emerges from the dimensions with which the respondents who argued with either side of the two viewed and interpreted it. For instance the academic staff bemoaned the mechanical nature of its imposition while the administrators who are practically the implementers identified with the positive role it is set out to achieve.

Intra vs inter university quality management fulfillment

Quality managers are of the view that the quality management system they have in place and the way it is being applied is meeting internal quality requirements. Their thoughts and judgment about it is fairly from an inward perspective from within their respective institutions. Even where they look at quality from outside their university settings this is mainly done from within the nucleus of its national confines.

The academic staffs on the other hand gauge quality more from an outward view, mainly with other universities outside Malaysia in mind and this clearly contributes to their assessment of the quality assurance systems they have in their respective Universities. While they all acknowledged the presence of a quality assurance system backed by personnel and material support including documents and policies, they bewail the methods used as lacking in the much needed panache desirable to effect real change that would reinforce quality especially at the academic level.

University "X"

Two of the academic staff of University "X"- UX Aca 1 and 2 argued in favor of the quality management framework of their University as being adequate and achieving some improvement while the other two looked beyond their universities to compare the performance of their university.

UX Aca 2 who indicated that he has made significant contributions to the improvement of quality assurance in his university while working in that unit mentions that the systems they have in place are adequate and if there are problems they would be usually those of implementation. This is captured in the following quotation:

> I think the quality assurance systems are adequate enough but usually if there are problems is usually a problem of implementation. They are not usually a problem of say they are not adequate. They are adequate but it needs just proper implementation.

UX Aca 1 also thinks that the system in place is good despite acknowledging that there may be problems here and there:

> That is why I said here we have a good quality system because is a must that we implement the university quality system and also we must implement the faculty's and the professional body…….Are they addressing the problems yeah true they are addressing the problems that surface. That does not mean that problems are not coming again as you know if we don't have problems then we cannot move.

University "Y"

The academic staffs of UY were more relentless in their portrayal of the quality assurance system in their University, in comparison especially to Universities in the sub-region, as being short of the realities needed to effect meaningful change to compete on the same level with those especially in rankings. UY Aca 4 in the following excerpt compares quality assurance efforts of his University with those of Singapore and Korea and argues that with a similar resource base the gap in performance levels begs for some explanation on the part of her University and others in Malaysia:

> Ok here I will just remind you that quality is always done to improve and do better. So to say the system is addressing the problems 100% is not accurate. To some extent the office is doing very well and they set their goal in line with the vision and mission

> of this university. Faculties also set their goals based on the…that of the university and the same goes to staff. Maybe based on the goals of the university we can say that the quality management system is addressing the problems. Yes but if we are a bit ambitious and try to compare with top Universities even in the sub region here like Singapore, Korea then you see that there is a lot of room for improvement because we have the resources just like them to perform like them and they are doing very well better than us.

Similarly UY Aca 3, 1 and 2 also narrate similar thoughts on quality assurance in the University by questioning why their Universities lag behind when compared to their neighbouring countries in the sub-region despite several similarities they have in common. Accounts of their thoughts where they compare their university with those outside and the contexts in which they are given are explained subsequently. UY Aca 3 narrates that having quality assurance is just an indication that there is a system of quality and that some action geared towards improvement has been done. He goes on to indicate that their students would have already left and out in the field before they could gauge the effects of the quality measures. However he indicates that a yard stick he uses is to try to compare his university's situation with those of her outside neighbours like Singapore and Thailand for example and disappointingly they seem to be doing better probably because perhaps they are applying the right methods in quality:

> Quality assurance just indicate that we have this and this process and we have done this and this to fulfill but what is the effect. Most times we don't know because the students already finish and are outside. But we can also compare our situation with some of our neighbours like Thailand and Singapore because we have a lot in common with them. They are doing better than us and I believe they are not better than us. I think they just do the right things in quality.

Similarly UY Aca 1 also mentions Singapore and South Korea as examples of countries that are ahead of them in University rankings and thinks that they need to change from merely using quality as a means of

fulfilling requirements but rather build the culture of quality to see better performance:

> We all know we have a quality system in this country and I think all universities are using it but of course you know Singapore is far ahead for example, South Korea is also ahead for example. So you ask what the problem is. So I think we have to change from just using quality to fulfill requirements ahh …. Not just to …. Comply aaaah. We must build culture of quality so that you always want to do better even if nobody is watching you.

UY Aca 2 also cautions against being too excited about what their faculties and universities claim to have achieved about quality on paper. Making reference to the 2012 university rankings for Asia he points out that the top university in Malaysia is only in the first 30's which he bemoan as not being good enough because they should have been at least among the top ten:

> So like I said to measure improvement is very difficult. So coming back to your question I think yes they achieve a little bit problems but they cannot achieve all. You see achieving quality on paper is different from achieving quality in reality. I think is important we take note of that because quality is now a must and we should not feel too excited about what our faculties and university claim they achieve about quality on paper. Just look at Asian university rankings 2012 the top University in Malaysia is only in the first 30's in Asia. That is not good because we should be in top ten.

UY Aca 3 also explain that quality assurance in his university addresses problems they are set to achieve but he does think it generally addresses the issues of quality such as the quality of their teaching and the improvement of their graduates. He refers to some complaints employers are making about recent graduates some of whom have taken extra measures of giving tests to potential employees before they could trust them with employment. He explains his thought in the following excerpt:

> The quality assurance system is addressing the problems they are created to solve but they are not addressing the problem of quality

> in general.... that is why I said that they achieve quality based on that but whether quality is achieved in teaching and improving the quality of graduates I personally don't think so...

The divergence of views pertaining to the intra versus inter methods of gauging the fulfillment level of the quality assurance systems while pointing to the dissimilarity of thought of, in particular, the two categories of respondents also hints at little or none involvement of the academic staff especially in the designing stages of the quality assurance package; albeit they were involved at all, then it alludes to the non-consideration of their inputs as it did not seem to reflect in the way they describe the system especially in the manner they tried to compare their universities with well grounded ones in the sub-region.

Judging the nature of the positions taken by the two categories of respondents it is evident that a point of agreement may not have been difficult to reach if this were to be pursued. Since the academics look beyond the university's systems of quality assurance, perhaps engaging them would have been beneficial not only in giving them the psychological boost to accept the system beyond mere implementation but this may have raised quality levels at least beyond the current bar which would have been a double stimulus for the universities in this study. The opportunity lost to engaging both parties whose views could have been harness into a better improvement regime beneficial to both parties is still open to be exploited if the university administration revisits the quality assurance framework by engaging all staff including the academics to further consultation for better understanding, but most importantly their acceptance.

Theoretical Arguments - Concerns Based Adoption Model

The Concerns based model (CBAM) is an individual oriented model postulated to gauge the understanding dynamics of educators and the stakeholders within the circle of education who are experiencing change. It focuses on how educators adapt to change as they are learning an innovation through stages in the processes. Hence a key focus of this model is on the emotional component of the process encountered by the individuals involved.

The Concerns Based Adoption Model involves three principal dimensions i.e. Stages of concern, Levels of Use and innovation configuration but the focus of this study was centered on the concerns levels of staff culminating in the re-crafting of the stages of concerns questions to suit the specific aim. The stages of concern speak to the affective dimensions of the individual involving feelings and perceptions which are very important components for gauging a change-involving initiative such as quality assurance.

Quality Assurance is concerned with change which comes with all its reactions and ramifications. Hence the intensity of understanding of various individual as well as their reactions to it depends largely on their orientation and how they perceive things. Hence the CBAM model fittingly helped in making interesting analysis of the understanding levels of the respondents in this research. It helped to not only place in focus the difficult nature of quality assurance implementation with different categories of staff but also unearthed how they feel specifically and why despite the will to conform to implementation in practice policy makers should still endeavor to understand the deep feelings and thoughts on change especially if sustenance in the change is envisaged.

Quality matters especially issues surrounding their meaning, what they aim to achieve and their transferability in education remain a grey area needing effective means of dipping to make meaning out of what people think about it, and above all, how those thoughts could be brought into the whole framework such that the change initiative becomes acceptable and applicable. The stages of concern medium helped in first identifying the stage in which the staffs are and also take this further by seeking details of the reasons for being in that stage among other attributes related to the affective wellbeing of the respondents in this study.

Above all the Stages of concern exposes the understanding levels of staff especially what the academic staff referred to as a "negotiated resort" to follow procedures of quality assurance in other to ease a harmonious working relationship. In contrast the administrators were affirmative of their view of concerns levels of especially, academic staff, as being upbeat of the change initiative once its motive is understood to them. Interestingly therefore, an important finding of a rather lack of understanding emerges thanks to use of the stages of concerns as found in the concerns based adoption model.

Discussions

Differences in the manner of understanding quality assurance purposes especially in view of the methods being applied loomed large in this study. As custodians of quality assurance systems who are also responsible for its implementation, the administrators mainly took the constraints as normal issues that are expected to emanate from any change drive. The majority of their academic counterparts differed in their views as they practically described their roles as those of followers who are told what to do in order to improve, ironically, in a field they (the academics) specialize in. To put it mildly, a clear stalemate of differing arguments emerged in explaining how the two categories of respondents, for the most part, relay their reflections of the system of quality assurance holistically factoring both the policies surrounding it and the actual processes as they are faring on the ground; administrative staff are resigned to trusting time as a natural healer which would see an eventual approval and their academic counterparts, subdued by the cascading nature of quality assurance negotiate the tasks of quality assurance but remained largely convinced that nurturing and adapting quality is inevitable if the desired effects are to be realized.

Without doubt, quality assurance initiatives are conducted to achieve a lot of objectives among which are the improvement and accountability quests. All respondents in this study indicated that improvement and accountability are clearly among the objectives being achieved, somehow. The main sticking point was however what activities are being done to achieve this and the interpretation of priorities based on these actions. While the administrative staffs mainly argue on the principality of improvement as the lead in their initiatives, the majority of the academic staff looked at these actions more as outward aesthetics that are meant to paint a picture for all to see rather than a religious drive to improve. They argued that when improvement eventually emerges it comes more as a bonus added to the primary objective of accountability. Clearly, there would be no denying of the examples given by the respondents who identified with the improvement drive initiative of quality assurance. However academics are important stakeholders in the university and if their views on the quality framework are a bit murky as regards the methods being applied to implement it, one can sense that a great opportunity is

perhaps being lost in bringing them to accept the system which could have translated into better ways of doing things beneficial to all parties in the Universities.

Perspectives from which the respondents gauge quality management fulfillment also greatly varied. Administrative staff viewed and judged quality management system from an inward outlook. To them, the set internal objectives or those being targeted within the country justify the claims of improvement as these are being followed as much as they could with visible signs of results. However, in their assessment of quality management fulfillment, their academic counterparts did not only look beyond their institutional boundaries but also the national frontiers. For them quality is better measured against other institutions with similar traits such as the history and resources and these greatly impacted their assessment of the quality assurance system of their universities.

Situated within the concerns based adoption model to make meaning out of the findings, it stands to reason that the understanding levels of quality assurance is the major sticking point that has seen a clearcut interpretation in terms of what quality assurance aims to achieve and how much it has achieved in the case of the two universities in this study. Indeed quality assurance implementation is the major term of reference for the administrators and quality assurance managers. Most of them have spent a reasonable period administering quality assurance matters and hence it is not difficult to grasp that they understand the procedures fairly very well and more so believe it is meant to help staff improve. In fact, their concern levels were mainly between the consequence and the refocusing stages.

On the other hand the concern levels of academic staff were the management, collaboration and refocusing stages. The majority of academic staff were in the refocusing stage category with five of the total respondents identifying themselves with it; two others indicate belonging to management stage while one identified with the collaboration stage. This affirms that the marked differences in the level of understanding of quality assurance systems among the two groups of respondents emerged more from the dimension with which they construed it and how much they agreed with it after having understood what it is set out to achieve.

An intriguing focus of the Concerns Based Adoption Model is what happens at the individual level because a total picture of the organization will factor in every facet of the individual elements. Based on the findings,

there is clearly some dissimilarity in the way the purpose of quality is viewed specifically in the manner the processes are applied. This hints at some gap in the manner of thought of the two categories of respondents. Albeit, variations of thought is quite normal in institutional matters but the insinuation of quality as serving the purpose of accountability as the primary focus by academics impels the type of subsidiary attention that may not be beneficial for the pursuit of the serious attention quality assurance deserves.

Likewise, when key tenets and assumptions of the Concerns Based Adoption Model are employed to make meaning out of the intra versus inter rationalization of University Quality Management fulfillment it could be seen that change as a route, to which quality assurance systems can be categorized, factors the importance of some personal experiences for it to thrive. Among these assumptions are the values that change is accomplished by individuals and it is also a highly personal experience (Hord & Hall, 2001). This point to the importance of identifying the crucial role individuals play in the change process factoring their personal thought which is the starting point in the thinking process towards an innovation.

While organizations have shifted their gears more towards an organizational or systemic approach to improvement initiatives, the individual still continues to play a key role. The crucial role played by the individuals as "important components of the whole" continue to be held in the highest regard. It is for this reason that the CBAM model continues to be used to enable not only information gathering and sharing during a change process, but also a common language for all involved (Horsley & Loucks-Horsley, 1998).

Literature Contribution

The differences in scope of understanding quality assurance emanated as much from the lenses of gauging quality as it is from the position or roles played by the respondents. To the academic staff in this study quality was seen as core in teaching and learning and as such their involvement and more so their participation in shaping quality, as the architects in these important ventures, was considered vastly crucial. For administrators and managers of quality the package is hugely necessary to be applied and based on their interactions with all staff, including their academic

counterparts, the package is recognized as crucial and has not only been accepted but it is being applied by all categories of staff.

Indeed in the early years of the quality revolution the debates were very much concentrated on the understanding or rather interpretation of quality. This explains the extant of literature on the definition of quality especially between 1990s and 2000s.The definition of quality was however important to give direction to the debate. Harvey and Green (1993) came up with five interrelated concepts of quality in education namely: as exceptional; perfection (or consistency); fitness for purpose; value for money; and as transformative. Harvey (1995; 2006) embarked on various conceptualizations of the concept of quality and standards, and over the years came on to further clarify and strengthen these. Melrose (1998) branded three paradigms of curriculum evaluation illustrating them as functional in a technical sense, transactional in a naturalistic sense and critical from an emancipator viewpoint. In the process he suggests a link between concepts of quality and exemplars of curriculum evaluation which influences the evaluative operations of academic staffs. Idrus (2003) identified that the inability to create, disseminate or initiate concepts makes them easier to be transplanted rather than re-crafting as is always yearned for and quality quite rightly falls under these kinds of concepts with some big obstacles that impeded its acceptance in developing countries but cited that some paradigm faults responsible for this are not just the cultural ones.

Just as there were differing descriptions of quality anchored on various dimensions and viewpoints as seen in the literature over the years, the understanding levels of staff in this study also took a similar path. Prominent among these was the improvement versus accountability discuss. The academic staff saw more of accountability measures in what the administrators referred to as quality initiatives geared towards improvement. The academics based their arguments on zealous efforts being put in even the basic rubrics which they interpreted as theatrical. Harvey and Williams (2010) in their review of the quality literature over the past fifteen years noticed that in the accountability versus improvement debate "the overall tenor of the contributions was that external quality evaluations of whatever type were not particularly good at encouraging improvement, especially when they had a strong accountability brief" (p.7). Kis (2005) and Middlehurst & Woodhouse (1995) also related that notions

of improvement (as well as of accountability) are related to different judgements of value and balances of power for different groups.

The contention among the two groups in this study was whether purposes serve by the quality system could be identified with accountability or improvement and responses given were coterminous with their familiarity with quality assurance purposes and the different roles played by the respondents in these Universities. All Administrator and two academics staff who headed quality assignments reckoned with the improvement drive of the system while the six academic staff identified with the accountability claims. This finding sits on a similar trajectory to ones conducted by Thune (1996) in which he alluded that the improvement versus accountability dichotomy arose from a United Kingdom (UK) bias, based on the existence in parallel of an accountability-focused system owned by government and a quality assurance-focused system owned by universities. Stensaker (2003) also argued that the discuss involving improvement versus accountability adds to the view on how change takes place in higher education. Also various scholars have attested to the presence of a balance or a dualism between two purposes in quality assessment despite an emphasis on one or the other (Thune, 1996; Smeby & Stensaker, 1999; Kis, 2005).

Conclusions

This study was conducted with the objective of unearthing the understanding levels of administrative staff and their academic counterparts on the policy pronouncements on quality and its actual implementation as experienced. The two categories of staff interviewed had differing views on the purposes for which quality assurance system are being done. This results in an adjustment to a negotiated level of coexistence especially on the side of the academic staffs towards quality assurance systems and its implementation processes. The Academic staff looked at the quality assurance systems more as being driven by accountability while the administrators and managers viewed quality assurance systems as more of improvement mechanisms even if the accountability purposes would not be denied. The results of this study are limiting in their use of only two University and a qualitative methodology which delves more into depth than numbers but the results could serve as a good platform to understand

the issues raised which could be replicated in other universities to understand the bigger picture in terms of quality assurance understanding.

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