



## Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Alberta, Kenya and Norway

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### **Abstract**

Debate about academic quality assurance has often tended to bring into the fore extensive dispute about the meaning of the phrase. However, many observers appreciate the importance of quality assurance and enhancement of degree programming. This study examined issues in quality assurance of higher education in the Province of Alberta, Canada, Norway, and Kenya and the roles of Campus Alberta Quality Council, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, and the Kenya Commission for Higher Education in assuring and enhancing quality of higher education in the three jurisdictions. Possible lessons for Kenya and other developing countries are presented.

*Keywords:* quality assurance, higher education, Alberta, Kenya, Norway

### Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Alberta, Kenya and Norway

In Alberta, Kenya and Norway, postsecondary participation rates have been growing steadily for years (Snowdon, 2010; Aas, 2007; Odhiambo, 2006). While recognizing the public and private benefits of investment in higher education, Snowdon (2010) posited that at a time when many jurisdictions are investing heavily in their higher education sector, “government commitment to quality higher education must be strengthened” (p. 2). Law (2010) surmised that the rapid expansion of higher education provision makes it necessary to address the question of quality of degree programming and whether it is sacrificed for quantity.

Welle-Strand (2000) asserted that for a country to remain relevant in today’s competitive knowledge economy, it cannot afford to ignore the importance of the quality and reputation of its higher education institutions and programs. Snowdon (2010) predicted that it is the quality of a country’s graduates that will set it apart in the 21st century. Hence, degree programming in Alberta, Kenya, and Norway has undergone fundamental reforms in recent years (Snowdon, 2010; Lycke, 2004; Odhiambo, 2006). A primary aspect of higher education reforms in the three jurisdictions is the “emphasis on the pursuit of educational quality” (Law, 2010, p. 65).

Despite the reforms, debate about academic quality assurance has often tended to bring into the fore extensive dispute about the meaning of the phrase. Dill (2003, p. 1) suggested that “academic quality is amorphous, non-measurable, (and) too ambiguous in meaning as to be not appropriate for public regulation.” Beaton (1999, p. 4) argued that the “rhetoric of ... quality is often vague ... lacks substance (and) is empty of meaning” while Pounder (1999) posited that quality is a “notoriously ambiguous term” (p. 156). As a result of the difficulty in defining quality, the measurement of quality has also proved to be contentious (Becket & Brookes, 2006). In this study, ‘quality’ refers to continuous improvement in the search for excellence while

‘quality assurance’ means initiatives which are undertaken in the quest to assure and enhance quality of degree programming (Law, 2010) in Alberta, Kenya and Norway. The three jurisdictions were chosen because the author is a native of Kenya who has visited Norway and previously worked as a policy analyst at the Campus Alberta Quality Council. Primary sources for the descriptive aspects of this study were websites for Campus Alberta Quality Council ([www.caqc.gov.ab.ca](http://www.caqc.gov.ab.ca)), the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education ([www.nokut.no](http://www.nokut.no)) and the Kenya Commission for Higher Education ([www.che.or.ke](http://www.che.or.ke)).

This paper is loosely divided into five sections. Section one explores general issues in academic quality assurance. Section two discusses quality assurance of degree programming in Canada and the Province of Alberta. Section three explores higher education quality assurance and accreditation in Europe in general and Norway in particular. Section four presents an overview of quality assurance in Kenya, while section five suggests possible lessons for Kenya and other developing countries.

### **General Issues in Academic Quality Assurance**

Today, the increased popularity of academic quality assurance initiatives is perhaps best reflected in the membership of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE). From INQAAHE’s founding in 1990 through 2007, the year of its Biennial Conference in Toronto, the network’s membership increased from 12 to 180 agencies from over 70 countries. Most of these agencies are interested in the quality of postsecondary education especially due to such factors as increasing numbers of private providers, many of dubious provenance; rapid growth in transnational education leading to the need for a credible quality assurance process; and proliferation of new types of postsecondary programs and institutions (Law, 2010; Bond & Patton, 2007).

Quality assurance processes in higher education are based on four general principles (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994), namely, a coordinating agency (such as Campus Alberta Quality Council in Alberta, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, and the Commission for Higher Education in Kenya); self appraisal by the institution to be evaluated; a site visit by experts; and a report on the evaluation results prepared by experts. Among the objectives of conducting external evaluation is to declare the applicant institution's processes of self-evaluation and submit them to evaluation by a third party. The third party perspective being brought to the validation must however be a judicious mix of relevant technical expertise, and a detached external stakeholder perspective (Carmichael, 2007).

### **Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Canada**

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility and there is no federal ministry of education. In the absence of a coherent national quality assurance policy for higher education and lack of formal national system of accreditation for degree-granting institutions, there is a general acceptance that membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) serves as an assurance that the member institution has undergone a thorough assessment by credible peer experts who have concluded that the institution meets exacting criteria (Queen's University Senate Committee on Academic Development, 2004). As well as having their own internal quality assurance policies and processes, members of AUCC are committed to AUCC principles of institutional quality assurance. These principles include: provision of responsive, "high quality education that is competitive with that offered anywhere else in the world and the provision of complete and reliable information about the quality of their educational programs to maintain public confidence, (and) support mobility of graduates" (AUCC, 2008, p. 1).

Not all degree granting institutions in Canada are members of AUCC. Thus, while degrees awarded by non-AUCC member institutions in Alberta, such as Grant MacEwan University, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, and St. Mary's University College, are recognized in Alberta and beyond, some Canadian graduate schools, including those at Queen's University, do not consider them to be of comparable quality to those awarded by AUCC member institutions (Marshall, 2005). In Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Saskatchewan, only AUCC member institutions are authorized to offer degree programs (Marshall, 2004).

### **Academic Quality Assurance Process in Alberta**

Established in 2004 by an Act of legislature, Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) is the quality assurance agency that makes recommendations to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology on applications from postsecondary institutions to offer new degree programs in Alberta. Other than degrees in divinity, all degree programs offered in Alberta must be approved by the Minister. CAQC also has guidelines on quality assurance for Alberta universities that offer degree programming outside Alberta (see Working Group on Quality Assurance of off-site and International Degree Programs, 2009).

Upon receiving an application from a postsecondary institution to offer a degree program in Alberta, the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology initiates a two-stage review process. The ministry conducts a system coordination review of the proposed program to determine the need for the program and how it fits with other degree programs currently offered in Alberta. During the review process, the ministry may require the institution to submit a self-evaluation report. The self-study provides evidence of the institution's academic and strategic planning, governance and resources, as well as its analysis of any shortfalls and plans for

improvement (Bond & Patton, 2007). Following a successful system coordination review, the Minister refers the proposal to CAQC for quality review.

In evaluating the proposal, CAQC decides whether to employ a full review or an expedited review. A full review involves both an organizational review to determine if the institution is capable of implementing and sustaining the proposed degree program; and a program review to determine whether the quality of the proposed degree program meets CAQC's standards.

### **Full Campus Alberta Quality Council Review**

Full review usually applies to institutions that are proposing to offer a first degree, or first degree program at a new level (e.g., a first graduate degree). The organizational review team conducts a site visit to the institution, and using CAQC's organizational guidelines prepares a report for CAQC. The team report and the institution's response to it are then reviewed by CAQC. If the results are positive, the application is moved to the program evaluation stage of the review during which a review is conducted by a team of subject area experts recruited by CAQC. Using CAQC's program guidelines, the team reviews the proposal, visits the institution, and writes a report for CAQC. Based mainly on the team report and the institution's response to the report, CAQC makes its recommendation to the Minister on whether or not to approve the application.

### **Expedited Review**

CAQC may conduct a partially expedited review or a fully expedited review of a proposal. A partially expedited review does not require an organizational evaluation; rather CAQC engages a team of experts to assess the quality of the proposed degree program and prepare a report. In a fully expedited review, CAQC does a desk review of the proposal, may or

may not engage external evaluators, and does not conduct site visit of the institution. Fully expedited review usually applies to ‘mature’ institutions like the Universities of Alberta and Calgary.

CAQC guidelines and standards are comparable to those used by quality assurance agencies in Canada and internationally (see British Columbia Degree Quality Assessment Board, 2006; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005). CAQC emphasizes its commitment to the quality review of its own activities and to the sharing of best practices with other jurisdictions (Bond & Patton, 2007). CAQC’s organizational and program assessment standards and guidelines and its expectations of evaluators and applicant institutions are available on its website at [www.caqc.gov.ab.ca](http://www.caqc.gov.ab.ca).

### **Accreditation of Professional Programs**

A form of quality assurance and enhancement exists at a national level in Canada. Professional regulatory organizations, such as Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board, Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, and the Canadian Architectural Certification Board, participate in the establishment and review of postsecondary programs and other professional issues governing students' preparations for entry into such professions (Bond & Patton, 2007; Marshall, 2004). This form of review is based on meeting or exceeding predetermined requirements and leads to professional accreditation of specific programs.

Some programs offered by Alberta institutions are also accredited by American accreditation agencies. These include University of Calgary’s Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program that is accredited by the American Veterinary Medicine Association, and the University of Alberta School of Business and the University of Calgary Haskayne School of Business, both accredited by the American-based Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Whether or not the accrediting agency is based in Canada, meeting or exceeding the requirements of these agencies is an affirmation of quality (Bond & Patton, 2007). However, while CAQC recognizes the existence of such accreditations, its decisions are not subservient to those by other agencies (CAQC, 2007).

### **Challenges to Academic Quality Assurance in Alberta**

Alberta permits 'non-resident' institutions, such as the University of Northern British Columbia and University of Phoenix, to offer degree programs in the province. Because Alberta, and most Canadian Provinces have traditionally focused on resident institutions as opposed to commercial transnational universities (Leyton-Brown, 2004), observers, such as Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), worry that this gap could lead to a proliferation of degree mills (CMEC, 2007). Indeed, in 2007, the governments of China, India, and Korea advised their students to be cautious of private institutions in Canada following reports that British Columbia Minister of Advanced Education was investigating private for-profit institutions for granting university degrees in the province without authorization (Sen, 2007). The Minister later ordered Lansbridge University to cease its operations in the Province of British Columbia (B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education, 2007).

Although there is need for a coherent national process for ensuring quality of higher education programs in Canada, how this could be attained within the context of exclusive provincial/territorial jurisdiction over education is a longstanding policy dilemma. In 2007, provincial ministers responsible for higher education in Canada under the umbrella CMEC took a step towards a Canada-wide policy for quality assurance of degree education in Canada. The proposals endorsed by CMEC aim to "provide assurance ... at home and abroad that ... programs and ... institutions of higher learning meet appropriate standards" (Council of

Ministers of Education, Canada, 2007, p. 1). However, these proposals were non-binding and nothing has been done with respect to national quality assurance of degree programs in Canada since then.

Despite the importance of AUCC membership as attestation for institutional and program quality, there is a potential shortcoming in overreliance on AUCC given that AUCC has no re-accreditation requirement (Marshall, 2004). That is, once an institution becomes a member, it remains a member with no “further assessment of degree-granting capability” (Marshall, 2004, p. 92). As well, in the coming years, the presence of transnational private-for profit institutions in Alberta is likely to increase judging by the fact that between 2009 and 2010, Alberta Minister of Advanced Education approved four new graduate degree programs to be offered in Alberta by City University of Seattle, Gonzaga University, and University of Portland (CAQC, 2010). Because private-for profit universities are currently excluded from AUCC membership, establishment of quality assurance standards and guidelines will be left to provincial politics, and thus, be susceptible to the type of abuse in the now-disbanded Ottawa Business College (Marshall, 2004, p. 18). The next section of this article explores how Europeans are dealing with the issue of academic quality assurance.

### **Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Europe**

European countries have diverse processes for quality assurance in their higher education sector. Among the objectives of the Bologna Declaration is “the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies” (Campbell & van der Wende, 2000, p. 2). As a participant in the Bologna Process, Norway has committed itself to the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The Council of European Union recommended that national

systems of higher education quality assurance be based on: 1) autonomy of the quality assurance agencies; 2) relating evaluation procedures to the way institutions see themselves; 3) internal and external evaluation; 4) involvement of stakeholders; and 5) publication of evaluation reports (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005).

European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance in institutions of higher education stipulate that institutions should have: 1) policies and procedures for the assurance of the quality of their programs; 2) formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programs and awards; 3) student assessment policies that include using published criteria, regulations and procedures; 4) qualified and competent academic staff; 5) adequate and appropriate resources to support student learning for each program offered; and 6) means of collecting analysing and using relevant information of the effective management of their programs of study (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005).

### **Higher Education in Norway**

Norway has a highly educated population. According to 2002 statistics, 55 percent of Norwegians have completed upper secondary schooling and 31 percent are college or university graduates (Correa, 2008). Four of Norway's seven universities are listed among the top 500 in the world (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2009). Higher education in Norway is offered by a range of seven universities, eight specialized universities, 25 university colleges, as well as a number of private university colleges. Norwegian higher education system is in accordance with the Bologna Process, with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is the organization mandated to safeguard and enhance the quality of higher education in Norway. It

does this through evaluation, accreditation and recognition of quality systems, institutions and programs of study (NOKUT, 2006). Unlike CAQC whose mandate covers only degree programs, NOKUT ensures quality of both degree programs and vocational education at the postsecondary level.

Lycke (2004) argued that quality processes in the Norwegian higher education sector have “not traditionally been associated with the term quality assurance but with quality development (and) ... has largely been synonymous with multifaceted and multilevel development of quality of studies” (p. 219). Among the broad purposes of quality assurance of degree programming in Norway are to: 1) ensure that higher education in Norway is of high quality and is developing toward further improvements, 2) reveal cases of deficient quality and to detect good and bad quality, 3) provide educational institutions with a basis for self-assessment and change, and 4) help to develop a strong quality culture (NOKUT, 2003).

Evaluation criteria in Norwegian higher education do not relate directly to the quality of educational provision, but concern the quality assurance system and the quality work that is carried out in the institution (Aas, 2007). Norwegian institutional quality assurance system is evaluated both internally and externally and developed in accordance with needs and in the spirit of continual improvement (Lycke, 2004). The Ministerial Regulation, NOKUT’s criteria and the European standards and guidelines together make up the standard against which internal quality assurance systems at Norwegian institutions of higher learning are evaluated.

As in Alberta, the process of evaluation in Norway includes: 1) a study of documentation from institution’s quality assurance system including a description of the system and annual report on educational quality; 2) an assessment made by an expert panel based on the institution’s documentation and the standards and criteria for internal quality assurance systems;

3) site visit to the institution by the panel; and 4) presentation of the panel report to NOKUT.

The report and institution's response to it forms the basis of NOKUT's decision on whether or not the quality assurance system is satisfactory. If the results indicate that the institution's quality assurance of its approved programs does not meet NOKUT's expectations, then the institution could lose the right to establish new programs (Danø & Stensaker, 2007). The sections above have briefly explored academic quality assurance processes in Alberta and Norway. The next section discusses how Kenya assures and enhances quality of its degree programs.

### **Higher Education Quality Assurance in Kenya**

Kenya has eight public and 17 private universities. A number of foreign institutions including Edith Cowan University (Australia), Technicon Southern Africa University (South Africa), and the University of Sunderland (Great Britain) are also offering their degree programs, usually in partnerships with local Kenyan institutions. Private universities include United States International University which is accredited both in Kenya by Commission for Higher Education and in the United States by The Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities. About 20 percent of the 150,000 university students attend private universities. The annual university enrolment in Kenya accounts for less than 10 percent of the high school graduates (Oloo, 2010).

Public universities in Kenya are established under their respective Acts of parliament, giving them autonomy in governance and quality assurance. Thus, unlike Alberta and Norway, in Kenya there is no external agency that accredits or monitors the quality of the public universities (Commission for Higher Education, 2008; Odhiambo, 2006). Private universities, on the other hand, are established under the Universities Act of 1986 and the associated University rules of 1989. The University Act established the Kenya Commission for Higher Education (CHE), the

agency that accredits private universities and their programming. As is the case in Alberta and Norway, both institutional and program accreditation processes involve institutional self-study and the use of external experts who conduct a site visit of the institution and write an evaluation report for the CHE.

Public universities in Kenya may choose to enter into partnership agreements with non-degree granting private or public colleges to deliver their degree programs (Commission for Higher Education, 2006). This policy is double-edged. While it empowers public universities to be responsive to demand for degree programming and is less bureaucratic, public institutions are expected to 'accredit' the colleges they partner with to deliver their programs. However, public universities have been accused of putting more emphasis on increased enrolment to raise money from tuition than on quality of their degree programs (Odhiambo, 2006). Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, for example, delivers its programs at 22 colleges scattered all over the country. In some cases, these colleges are understaffed and lack adequate facilities to deliver quality higher education (Commission for Higher Education, 2006).

### **Challenges and Possible Future Development**

According Lycke (2004), four main purposes of academic quality assurance are to ensure and develop quality, to detect good and bad quality, to put in place a strong quality culture, and as a basis for self-assessment and change. In their own ways, CAQC, NOKUT, and CHE play fundamental roles in achieving these goals in Alberta, Norway, and Kenya respectively. A challenge facing CAQC, NOKUT and CHE is striking a good balance in their roles as a tool for sanctioning and rewarding, conducting evaluation processes that presuppose interpretations and judgments, and operating systems that require equal and fair treatment of institutions (Aas, 2007).

Both CAQC and NOKUT were founded less than a decade ago, so they are relatively young organizations. CHE has been in existence since 1986. Unlike CAQC and NOKUT, CHE has jurisdiction over private institutions and not public institutions. A challenge facing CAQC, CHE, and NOKUT with respect to their roles in higher education quality assurance is striking a good balance in their quests to achieve their three main goals: their roles as a tool for sanctioning and rewarding, conducting evaluation processes that presuppose interpretations and judgments, and operating systems that require equal and fair treatment of institutions (Aas, 2007).

CAQC, NOKUT and CHE continuously maintain documentation and processes that guide academic quality assurance and enhancement in their respective jurisdictions. However, there is a potential risk of paying less attention to whether institutions are teaching and assessing their students at appropriate levels as the agencies' processes and guidelines tend to emphasize on whether institutions have established and documented in great detail processes which may or may not enhance teaching and student assessment (Moodie, 2008). As Law (2010, p. 72) put it, higher education systems "tend to favour the institutional aspects rather than the student aspects of the quality issues," as well as put more emphasis on the "accountability-led view rather than the improvement-led view of quality assurance."

Moodie (2008) posited that monitoring in academic quality should be of standards directly and not of processes which may or may not result in high quality. He suggested that quality assurance agencies should take a risk management approach rather than seeking to apply the same level of scrutiny to all institutions and all areas. That is, CAQC, CHE, and NOKUT should scrutinize most intensively institutions and areas that are at greatest risk of a lapse of standards and it should spend far less effort monitoring institutions and areas that have a low risk of poor standards.

### **Lessons for Kenya and Other Developing Countries**

While public universities in Kenya enjoy autonomy with respect to entering in to partnerships, starting new programs, and ensuring quality of their programs, there should be some form of accountability and transparency in their policies on quality assurance after all they get public funding. This could be by way of an external oversight by peers or organizations such as CHE. External review promotes institutional quality improvement by giving a third party feedback to the institution as well as enhancing and legitimizing internal quality management (Leyton-Brown, 2004).

As stated above, institutional self-appraisal is a key aspect of quality assurance and enhancement in Alberta, Kenya and Norway. However, unlike in Alberta and Norway where CAQC and NOKUT conduct external evaluation of institutions and programs respectively, in Kenya, public universities are not mandated to undergo external appraisal. While self-assessment can be variable in its quality and effectiveness (Leyton-Brown, 2004), it is the foundation of well-managed and successful institutions (Lloyds, 2003) and is likely to lead to quality enhancement of degree programming and make the “reports of external reviewers more useful to that purpose” (Leyton-Brown, 2004, p. 11). Trow (1996, p. 30) posited that effective quality assurance and enhancement is premised on “efforts to create an institutional culture marked by self-criticism, openness to criticism by others, and a commitment to improvement in practice.” Thus both self-evaluation and external evaluation should be emphasized in the quest for quality degree programming by public universities in Kenya.

This study discussed quality assurance of higher education in Alberta, Norway, and Kenya. Alberta and Norway have a long history of quality assurance of their degree programming and have world class universities. Despite the challenges both face in their quest

for assuring and enhancing quality of their higher education, there are lessons from their experience that would be valuable to Kenya and other developing nations. These include transparency, accountability, and increased emphasis on external review of quality assurance processes of both institutions and quality assurance agencies. As well, quality assurance must not be reduced to rules of inspection and control but rather should aim at enhancing quality of degree programming and upholding institutional independence and accountability.

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