



## Research Article

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**Implementing Quality Assurance in Higher Education to Enhance Sustainable Development: Challenges and Opportunities, Zimbabwean Perspectives**C. M. Ncube<sup>1</sup>, A. Maradze\*<sup>1</sup>, P. Dube<sup>2</sup>, S. Ndlovu<sup>2</sup>, GN Shava<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Lupane State University, Lupane, Zimbabwe<sup>2</sup>National University of Science and Technology, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe**Article History**

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**Abstract:** Higher and tertiary education is crucial for the development of every country and is critical to effectiveness in this globalised society. Quality culture has become a widespread concept Zimbabwean higher education context of quality assurance for the past years. The study sought to explore the challenges and opportunities of implementing quality assurance in Zimbabwean higher education. It was established that quality assurance systems of higher education in Zimbabwe are still at an infant stage and thus confronted by many challenges. Moreover, the Zimbabwe quality assurance processes in higher education are a very recent phenomenon and where these structures have been established, institutions face major capacity constraints. The main challenges to implementing quality assurance for sustainable development in Zimbabwe are cost and human capacity requirements. Alzafari (2017) pointed that operating a national quality assurance agency typically entails a huge budget and requires appropriately trained and experienced staff. In addition lack of clarity about what the purpose of quality assurance should be, about the adequateness of diverse methods and instruments used by quality assurance mechanisms, or concerning the consequences of quality monitoring results is another challenge faced by Zimbabwean higher education institutions. On that same note there is potential resistance from academics who view quality assurance as an external process imposed on them and there is still a lack of clarity about what the purpose of quality assurance should be. Even though there are some challenges in implementing quality assurance in higher education, it was also established that there are some opportunities which comes with implementing quality assurance in higher education which includes that ZIMCHE carries out audits in Higher Education Institutions as a way of verifying situations prevailing in these institutions. Furthermore, ZIMCHE organises the Research and Intellectual Expo (RIE) annually. RIE provides a platform for showcasing the best research and intellectual work by Zimbabweans both at home and in the Diaspora as an attempt to exhibit how investment in higher and tertiary education is benefiting the country (RIE, 2012). On the same note as an opportunity to enhance quality for sustainability there is a board called, the Academic and Student Affairs Committee (ASAC) which is responsible for informing Council of students' welfare in institutions of higher learning, while making the necessary recommendations that would help enhance such welfare.

**Keywords:** Society, Higher Education, ASAC, ZIMCHE, Institutions, RIE, Welfare.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Academic quality assurance can be referred to as ensuring that all the processes involved in the institution of students remain standardized at all levels and all times. On the same note Okabukola (2004) states that it is a process of continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities which will be achieved via pathways of employing mechanisms internal and external to the system. The notion of quality in the context of higher education is hard to define precisely (Hanushek & Wossmann, 2007) where universities have broad autonomy to decide on their own visions and missions. The rapid growth of higher education systems in the Southern African region has raised concerns about quality, sustainability and development of the education system offered by higher education institutions.

Sustainable development is understood as the existence of a prosperous and fair economy which is sustainable for the environment and should become the

world's first and most important concern as it is the only path towards the survival of our species (WEF, 2016). Blanco-Pérez et al. (2019) noted that to achieve true sustainable development and quality in higher education, humanity needs to be empowered with good ideas and clarity of thought, policies should be about well-being and the common goal should be the priority. As the rapid growth of higher education systems in Zimbabwe has raised concerns about quality, sustainability and development of the education system offered by higher education institutions, the country has faced challenges in implementing quality assurance in higher education institutions to enhance sustainable development. In this particular study the authors seek to explore the challenges and opportunities of implementing quality assurance in Zimbabwean higher education institutions, Zimbabwean perspectives as articulated below

**Quality Assurance in Higher Education**

The movement of quality in education started in 1964 with the establishment of CNAA (Council of

National and Academic Awards) in Great Britain to guarantee quality and standards in new polytechnic sector (Tanweer & Qadri, 2016). This movement boosted the receptiveness of the scholars about quality in higher education and initiated the debate about what constitutes quality in higher education. In initial years, Total Quality Management (TQM) in manufacturing concerns were adapted and applied for quality in higher education (Shaban & Qureshi, 2013) which were later negated by academic scholars (Tanweer & Qadri, 2016).

In Zimbabwe, the internationalization in higher education has resulted in “a growing demand for accountability and transparency which in turn led to a need to develop a quality culture, while addressing the challenges of globalized higher education” (Smidt, 2015). In a practical sense, quality assurance reviews provide external, third party, independent, objective insights. Such reviews offer observations about partner institutions, products, programs, services, and processes, and they provide recommendations for improvement. Nonetheless, “the perception of quality assurance is very multi-dimensional and contextual and a gap exists in the view between professionals in quality assurance and academic staff and students” (Smidt, 2015).

Several key dimensions of quality in higher education include excellence, value, consistency, and meeting needs and expectations; yet no one quality assurance framework can address all aspects of quality, so choices are made about what kinds of quality are assessed (Harvey, 2014). A common framework for a quality assurance model would provide consistent assessment of learning design, content, and pedagogy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008).

Ryan (2015) further noted that there are many disparate ways to characterize quality in education. According to Barnett (Schindler et al, 2015), there are two conceptions of quality in higher education. The first is tacit conceptions of value and intellectual property in academia. It is the character and quality of the contributions of higher education's members that are at issue rather than any outcomes. The other conception of quality is the performance conception, in which higher education is seen as a product with inputs and outputs. In this view, the quality of higher education is measured in terms of performance as captured in performance indicators. Another conception of quality in higher education is of faculty-student interaction (Ryan, 2015).

There exist different understandings of higher education system (HES) in different countries. In the context of Zimbabwe, this is legally defined by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) Act (2006) as cohesion at the level of policy and planning with respect to but not limited to governance, institutions, funding and financing, staffing, facilities,

and programs that support teaching and learning. In the same Act, higher education (HE) is defined as education provided by higher education institutions (HEIs), which includes technical or polytechnic college offering degrees, a public or private university or university college and its associate or affiliate institutions and an arm of a foreign institution of higher education that awards degrees. It is important to note that Higher Education institutions does not include other postsecondary training systems such as tertiary education and vocational education systems except when such institutions offer degree programs (which they can only do in association/affiliation with a registered university).

The outstanding expansion of HE was properly planned to include a sharp focus on quality. Accordingly, in 1990, the government established the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), a no autonomous agency to process applications from prospective HEIs and to advise the Minister on HE matters. The increase in HEIs from 1 in 1990 to 14 (9 public and 5 private) between 1999 and 2005 happened at a time where resources were dwindling resulting in fear of a possible decline in standards. In order to redress the situation, in 2006, a more robust semi-autonomous body with an expanded quality assurance mandate, the Zimbabwe Council for higher education (ZIMCHE), replaced the NCHE.

#### **ZIMCHE**

ZIMCHE is the sole and competent agency charged with the responsibility to monitor and evaluate the performance of HEIs through registration, accreditation, and academic audits; harmonization of quality assurance systems and procedures; quality promotion; as well as advisory services. ZIMCHE gives HEIs that meet the requirement certificates of institutional accreditation and reaccreditation every 5 years based on institutional assessments and audits. It also conducts evaluations for new programs prior to approval. This is important in ensuring relevance and compliance with the set standards of governance, infrastructure, teaching and learning facilities and resources, systems, and staff (Garwe & Thodhlana, 2018).

Garwe & Thodhlana (2018), further articulates that the standards or academic staff require that a lecturer should possess qualifications that are pitched at least one level higher than the exit level of the programs (e.g., a master's holder can only teach programs at bachelor's level) with the minimum lecturer qualification pegged at master's level. Institutional/program accreditation is a legal expectation and a quality endorsement symbol that every HEI aspires to get since it ensures public confidence. In addition to the ZIMCHE accreditation, HEIs are free to engage other external (non-Zimbabwean) accreditation agencies as part of their quality management endeavours. In the

same vein, ZIMCHE also accredits foreign HEIs, which receive and train students from Zimbabwe.

ZIMCHE's quality assessments are based on self-evaluation reports submitted by HEIs followed by assessment by external peer review teams. While shortcomings may lead to suspension of a program or withdrawal of the HEI's right to award degrees (de-registration), the academic and institutional audits are, in the first instance, improvement-oriented. HEIs are given ample time to rectify the anomalies identified before punitive measures are taken. All HEIs are obliged to establish internal/institutional quality assurance units. This gives ZIMCHE a pivotal role in the HES in that it operates at a macro-level and can add value to the system. Furthermore, it represents Zimbabwe in regional and international quality assurance networks and for a (Garwe & Thodhlana, 2018).

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sustainable development is understood as the existence of a prosperous and fair economy which is sustainable for the environment and should become the world's first and most important concern as it is the only path towards the survival of our species. In this sense, ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement and other declarations like the Incheon declaration 2030 offer unique and valuable guidelines for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals as key framework and also define ambitious objectives (WEF, 2016).

Education for a more sustainable future includes improving quality higher education, reorienting the education system to address sustainability, improving public awareness, and providing training to many sectors of society. Higher education institutions the world over should seek to orient their curricula to address issues of sustainability and teacher educators are key change agents in orienting education towards addressing sustainability (Rodriguez-Riesco, 2019).

### The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not the first set of goals designed to help nations work together towards creating a clear planet and more just global society. The initial Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were formulated in 2000 at the Darkar Framework for Action and included eight goals to be achieved by 2015 (Shava et al, 2021). These are

- to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- to achieve universal primary education
- to promote gender equality and empower women

- to reduce child mortality
- to improve maternal health
- to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- to ensure environmental sustainability
- to develop a global partnership for development (UN, 2000, Gaby, 2015; WEF, 2000).

The second goal specifically focused on universal primary education but remained silent about quality in education yet universal education of poor quality is meaningless, learners need to exit the education system with skills and competences for their survival.

### Incheon Declaration

On 1 January 2016 an ambitious new plan was launched at the Incheon Declaration, which increased the number of goals from eight to seventeen with Goal 4 seeking to: ensure quality education for all (Palmer, 2015; WEF, 2016). This therefore implies that education for sustainable development is far more than teaching knowledge and principles related to sustainability but in its broadest sense, it is education for social transformation with the goal of creating more sustainable societies to address through education, and numerous interrelated challenges like quality in education (UNESCO, 2017). The idea of lifelong learning for all is a key element of education for sustainable development and also specifically addressing sustainable development goal four which was the emphasis of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals. This suggests that quality higher education can act as a powerful engine towards a developed, sustainable and a more cohesive and equal society. The vision of quality sustainable development in education is to transform lives through education recognising the importance of higher education as a main driver of development.

### Challenges In Implementing Quality Assurance To Enhance Sustainable Development In He

Challenges with regard to quality in higher education exist everywhere; they are not unique to Zimbabwe. This topic has been placed on the higher education policy agendas and actively and continuously addressed in nearly all parts of the world for at least the last three decades, if not longer in some parts of the world. For example, in the United States, the process of voluntary accreditation, as an endeavor to ensure and certify quality, dates back to the 1900s. In Europe, the first major discussions and reforms related to assuring quality of higher education took place around 1980s, mainly in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, while a bigger, revolutionary wave of changes followed across the other European countries in the 2000s, in relation to the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).(Enders & Westerheijden, 2014).

In Zimbabwe, quality culture has become a widespread concept in Zimbabwean higher education context of quality assurance for the past years. In Zimbabwe and perhaps the entire African region, structured national quality assurance processes in higher education are a very recent phenomenon and where these structures have been established, institutions face major capacity constraints (Shava et al, 2019).

The main challenges of implementing quality assurance in higher education for sustainable development includes that quality assurance systems of higher education in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular are still at an infant stage and thus confronted by many challenges. Shava et al (2021) posits that, little is available in the literature on what African countries are doing to regulate and improve higher education quality, what it takes to implement these initiatives, what has been the impact, and what are the priorities for capacity building.

Moreover, existing quality assurance structures are young, the majority have been established within the last 10 years. In Zimbabwe the main challenges to implementing quality assurance for sustainable development in Zimbabwe are cost and human capacity requirements. Alzafari (2017) pointed that operating a national Quality Assurance Agency typically entails a huge budget and requires appropriately trained and experienced staff. Investing in higher education teaching and learning institutions and research and development are important as investing in physical capital and physical infrastructure such as roads bridges and railway lines (Alzafari, 2017).

On the same note, Galen (2015) states that if quality is to be embedded successfully in a university, then high-level management and leadership commitment and abilities will be crucial in achieving this. Furthermore, Mokhlar et al. (2013) also concur that top management of an institution play an important role in driving the organization to quality improvement and organizational excellence. Shava et al (2021) further noted that top management should provide evidence of its commitment to the development and implementation of the quality management system and continually improve its effectiveness by communicating to the organization the importance of meeting customer as well as statutory and regulatory requirements.

Materu (2007) argue that, effective quality assurance depends largely on the availability of highly qualified faculty members and administrators within institutions and competent professionals and technical staff in national quality assurance agencies. The process of implementing effective quality assurance requires an additional set of skills in order to ensure that the work is credible and has its own internal quality guarantees. The presence of senior staff with experience in higher

education processes is critical and necessary to provide for quality assurance in education (Newton, 2010).

On the same note Shava et al (2021) noted that there is potential resistance from academics who view quality assurance as an external process imposed on them and articulated the risks below there is still a lack of clarity about what the purpose of quality assurance should be, about the adequateness of diverse methods and instruments used by quality assurance mechanisms, or concerning the consequences of quality monitoring results. Identifying the features of effective quality assurance systems is rendered more complicated by the difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of the quality assurance system. In some cases, it is difficult to know how the quality of education would have changed without the implementation of quality assurance processes and it is not easy to measure the outcome of quality in higher education (Shava et al, 2021).

Potential resistance from academics who view quality assurance as an external process imposed on them.

- The risk of over bureaucratization of quality assurance process.
- Quality assurance not considered as an opportunity for genuine reflection and improvement in teaching and learning.
- The risk of insufficient academics in the development of quality assurance as academic ownership of the quality assurance process.
- Lack of resources to support quality assurance initiatives and sufficient funding.
- Lack of quality experts to conduct external reviews.
- Lack of leadership commitment to strengthen institutional quality assurance.

### **Opportunities of Implementing Quality Assurance in HE To Enhance Sustainable Development In HE**

Even though there are challenges which have been noted with regards to implementing quality assurance in HE to enhance sustainable development, opportunities have been noted which includes that, ZIMCHE carries out audits in Higher Education Institutions as a way of verifying situations prevailing in these institutions. In carrying out these audits ZIMCHE gives special attention to, Staff levels in institutions, qualifications of staff teaching at various levels, enrolment statistics per programme, facilities available for use by students including lecture rooms, library facilities, hostels and recreational facilities, special facilities and equipment that promote academic excellence (Shizha, 2011). The verification is done by using audits instruments and making audits visits. Well trained peer reviewers make up audits teams and where it is deemed necessary, foreign external reviewers are engaged (Garwe & Thodhlana, 2018).

As an opportunity of achieving sustainable development in higher education, ZIMCHE has also encouraged universities to create Institutional Quality Assurance Units which carry out internal audits for the purpose of guaranteeing quality in their operations. Nilson (1997) found out that effective internal quality assurance mechanism can help institutions to improve their teaching and educational processes since it benefits both students and stakeholders. Moreover, Seletso (2012) asserts that internal self-evaluation will ensure that the students acquire quality academic programmes from HEIs.

Minimum Body of Knowledge ZIMCHE is in the process of determining the minimum body of knowledge (MBK) which must be learnt by students who undertake each study programme at the higher education institutions in Zimbabwe (Shizha, 2011). The determination is done by experts in each of the study areas. The experts are called to a workshop where they spend some time to work on the documents. This work will help in achieving comparable standards in what is learnt by students embarking on similar degree programmes at different universities. The MBK project is similar to the “tuning” project which offers the comparability and compatibility of university curricula for the global higher education community. This then becomes an opportunity to achieve sustainable development in higher education (Garwe & Thodhlana, 2018).

Moreover, ZIMCHE organises the Research and Intellectual Expo (RIE) annually. RIE provides a platform for showcasing the best research and intellectual work by Zimbabweans both at home and in the Diaspora as an attempt to exhibit how investment in higher and tertiary education is benefiting the country (RIE, 2012). The event is aimed at harnessing leading innovations, research and intellectual output from Zimbabweans and utilising these to spur development of the country. Cognisant of the realisation that no nation can develop without exploiting the knowhow and wisdom inherent in its citizens, ZIMCHE aims to pool and direct outstanding intellectual work, creativity and research outputs develop Zimbabwe and to enhance the country’s competitiveness. Each year, RIE provides researchers with an opportunity to present select, peer reviewed research as well as artefacts and other creative works. From the presented papers, a selection of the best papers is made and these are then published in the *Journal of Zimbabwe Studies: Arts, Humanities and Education* or the *Journal of Zimbabwe Studies: Science, Technology and Health* depending on the discipline (RIE, 2012). The Expo also provides a platform for the exhibition of prototype products developed by Zimbabwe’s science, technology and innovation specialists, as Research in Higher Education Journal Quality assurance in higher education.

On the same note as an opportunity to enhance quality for sustainability there is a board called, the Academic and Student Affairs Committee (ASAC) which is responsible for informing Council of students’ welfare in institutions of higher learning, while making the necessary recommendations that would help enhance such welfare. The ultimate objective is for the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) to contribute towards the sustenance of environments conducive to learning thereby enhancing the quality of human capital produced in Zimbabwe’s institutions of higher learning (Garwe & Thodhlana, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from the arguments made above it can be noted that ZIMCHE is relatively very young, having only been established in 2006, therefore quality assurance systems of higher education in Zimbabwe are still at an infant stage and thus confronted by many challenges. The main challenges to implementing quality assurance for sustainable development in Zimbabwe are cost and human capacity requirements. In addition, lack of clarity about what the purpose of quality assurance should be, about the adequateness of diverse methods and instruments used by quality assurance mechanisms, or concerning the consequences of quality monitoring results is another challenge faced by Zimbabwean higher education institutions. On that same note there is potential resistance from academics who view quality assurance as an external process imposed on them and there is still a lack of clarity about what the purpose of quality assurance should be. Despite the challenges in implementing quality assurance in higher education, it can be noted that there are some opportunities which comes with implementing quality assurance in higher education which includes that ZIMCHE carries out audits in Higher Education Institutions as a way of verifying situations prevailing in these institutions. Furthermore, ZIMCHE organises the Research and Intellectual Expo (RIE) annually. RIE provides a platform for showcasing the best research and intellectual work by Zimbabweans both at home and in the Diaspora as an attempt to exhibit how investment in higher and tertiary education is benefiting the country (RIE, 2012). Lastly but not least as an opportunity to enhance quality for sustainability there is a board called, the Academic and Student Affairs Committee (ASAC) which is responsible for informing Council of students’ welfare in institutions of higher learning, while making the necessary recommendations that would help enhance such welfare.

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