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UMR 196

WORKING **PAPER**

59

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August **2024**

UNIVERSITE PARIS CITE
INSTITUT DE RECHERCHE POUR LE DEVELOPPEMENT

10.5281/zenodo.13375163

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Citation recommandée Recommended citation

Mariame S, Meyer JB. « Quality Assurance in Southeast Asia's Higher Education: some lessons for Africa? », *Working Paper du Ceped*, n°59, Ceped (UMR 196 Université Paris Cité IRD), Paris, August 2024.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13375163 | http://www.ceped.org/wp

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Quality Assurance in Southeast Asia's Higher Education: some lessons for Africa?

Mariame Sano[a] & Jean-Baptiste Meyer[a]

Most countries have quality assurance (QA) systems to monitor and improve their educational policies. Typically, such systems aim at enhancing transparency, assessing performance, and providing appropriate guidelines for forward-looking practices. Higher education institutions (HEIs) in developed countries have implemented QA systems that ensure consistent and transparent achievements. The main objective herein is to evaluate existing practices, identify crucial strategies for future planning as well as draw lessons that can be applied to Sub-Saharan African countries. Nevertheless, the review has indicated that though both areas have embraced Western-influenced QA frameworks, Southeast Asian nations are more successful in domesticating these systems. Fundamentally, it emphasizes that global standards must be reconciled with context-specific approaches and suggests how effective quality assurance systems can be developed in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: higher education, quality assurance, West Africa, South-East Asia, policy-borrowing.

INTRODUCTION

The increased demand for higher education puts pressure on higher education systems globally. As Gbollie argues (Gbollie et al., 2014), it is important "to increase the accessibility of higher education to facilitate the accommodation of the growing student population." This is particularly true in Asia and Africa today. While accessibility is a well-researched topic, education quality assessment still requires further investigation. Indeed, as Roser argues, "While we have good empirical data on access to education, we know considerably less about the quality of education" (Roser et al. 2013).

Yet, quality enhancement is one of the most critical challenges in global higher educational institutions (HEIs) policy. Tapera and Kuipa (2016) assert that students' grades, abilities, and skills, should mirror the quality of their acquired knowledge upon graduation and entry into the workforce. Implementing QA best practices can enhance quality. We can also examine the administration and governance of higher education systems using quality assurance techniques.

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This paper presents a comparative literature review of QA systems in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan African countries today. The paper then utilizes insights from the examining QA systems in Southeast Asian Higher Education Institutions. It concludes by examining the potential application of these systems in African Higher Education Institutions for their future growth.

However, it is essential to note that HEIs in most developing countries also aim to develop and implement efficient quality assurance systems (Okae-Adjei, 2016). Indeed, QA has advanced to the forefront of most HEIs' agendas worldwide. However, we must review QA processes to ensure the relevance and accuracy of criteria, and the proper use of acquired data. The execution, monitoring, and amendment of the policy are the responsibilities of HEIs (Mishra, 2007). This paper looks at how such historical events might affect local educational policies. It also looks at important elements to consider when running QA initiatives in these countries.

Africa's educational achievements had become disconnected from their historical context, as colonialism imposed new external institutional models that were not deeply ingrained in the continent. Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2013) go on to illustrate how, over time, the arrival of these colonial powers and their colonial ideology disrupted the continuity of African Indigenous institutions, including education, and replaced them with new Eurocentric institutions.

Therefore, the focus of this study is to provide an exploratory look at how this socio-historical phenomenon influences each region's educational policy. However, unlike in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa's public education policies do not consider ethnic diversity, critical socio-historical events, or international politics. Exploration has three main objectives. The first step is to evaluate QA systems in East and Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the challenges and success factors. The next phase is to identify the key practices of QA systems in both regions. The third objective is to identify key lessons applicable to sub-Saharan African contexts.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN CONTEMPORARY HEI SYSTEMS

Amidst this, QA is becoming an increasingly important factor in ensuring educational relevance (Peter, 2007). These questions have one thing in common: they all ask how to define quality. It is widely acknowledged that "quality is at the top of most agendas, and improving

quality is the most important task facing any higher education institution (Sallis, 2014), but "there is probably no topic in education that is as discussed and controversial as quality" (Ossiannilsson et al., 2015). Nonetheless, because quality has many facets, more than 20 years of QA in higher education have failed to produce a consensus on the definition of quality (French et al., 2014). However, it is essential to identify the research criteria by investigating three major concepts in higher education: quality, QA, and quality management. Almost every country has acknowledged the importance and value of quality higher education for economic growth and its citizens (Lane, 2012).

Despite numerous changes, highly demanding societies still expect HEIs to perform successfully within their constraints. This is especially true in developing countries: "Higher education has never been as important to the developing world as it is now. It cannot guarantee rapid economic development, but sustained progress is impossible without it" (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). Similarly, rising enrolment decreased higher education expenditure, the rapid expansion of the private higher education sector, increased competition, and globalization pressures have fuelled the introduction of formal QA systems in Africa (Shabani, 2013). This has made it difficult for students to assess the quality of the HEI effectively. Africa's university sector was able to reclaim its central role in development at the turn of the century, following the decline of the 1980s due to the reallocation of resources away from universities and toward lower levels of education (Jowi & Sehoole, 2017).

Materu (2010) further highlighted that formal national-level QA mechanisms in African higher education are a relatively new phenomenon, with most nations facing significant capacity constraints. This explains why African HEIs appear to be replicating the QA frameworks of advanced economies rather than developing their frameworks for delivering quality higher education results in Africa (Ansah et al., 2017).

Global concerns challenge African countries in their early stages of development. The primary issue is the lack of research on the high educational institution systems in Sub-Saharan Africa and the effectiveness of quality certification organizations in this region. We selected South Asian nations as a comparative partner for Sub-Saharan African countries in this study due to their potential contribution to the overall research. Exploring and comparing that region in Asia would reveal the successes and shortcomings of their QA systems, which Sub-

Saharan African nations may most likely connect to. According to Nóvoa (2018), "high-performing countries are believed to have a high-quality system and provide the "best practices" that other countries should follow."

WHAT HAS BEEN OBSERVED?

Several Central and Southern Asian countries are advancing faster than the norm, although Sub-Saharan Africa is still far from parity at all educational levels (UNESCO, 2019). We approach the issue of policy and governance in HEI QA to propose potential future recommendations that could apply to Sub-Saharan African countries. In the Quality Assurance field in Higher Education, an investigative measure may be necessary to compare and adapt to a more sophisticated method. Mills et al. (2020) emphasize distinguishing several East Asian nations based on variables such as language, religion, economic prosperity, governance systems, and urban-rural divisions. They maintain that the phenomenal transformations in East Asia are not the result of a "miracle". They are the product of planned policy decisions. They underscore the crucial leadership principles, the necessary policy choices and trade-offs, and the essential policy implementation.

While most East Asian countries, like Africa, had to accept a complicated ethnic make-up as a result of colonial involvement, this condition has not resulted in endemic instability in most cases. South-East Asia, too, has had to deal with low human capital, but its nations have, for the most part, rapidly converted their people into assets through education investment (Coulibaly, 2020). For example, due to a lack of natural resources, the Singapore government has prioritized education in its economic and political national development goals (Gopinathan 2007). However, colonial encounters and Western hegemony have profoundly impacted East Asia as a whole in terms of economy, politics, and culture at various times. Transnational policy players have acted as unbiased observers and judges, while East Asian countries have been self-disciplined to conform to predetermined 'universal' patterns in education policy. English officials have recognized several fundamental qualities shared across East Asia, or more broadly, by global entities, such as 'world-class schools' and 'best systems' (Morris 2012).

Choosing Southeast Asian nations, however, does not imply that their systems are without issues or criticism. The comparison of quality assurance procedures in Southeast Asian and Sub-Saharan African

countries will provide Sub-Saharan African countries with direction and insight into their experiences, and they may be able to learn from them. However, the extent to which leadership, management, and governance structures—particularly in Africa—influence the quality of higher education remains unknown.

According to Mba (2012), the key issues necessitating QA interventions include massification, cross-border recognition of qualifications, the establishment of equivalencies, and other global dimensions of higher education. These factors have made it necessary to implement standards and quality practices at the local, sub-regional, national, and institutional levels.

According to Mbirithi (2013), the rapid expansion in the number of institutions in Africa (including Kenya), combined with comparable trends in student enrolment, has raised concerns about quality because resource upgrading has not kept pace with enrolment growth. Okwakol (2008) states that most African institutions lack enough physical facilities to provide a good learning and teaching environment, such as lecture rooms, offices, libraries, and laboratory spaces. Consequently, HEIs around the world in this century, especially those in developing nations, have started relying on QA and quality management models and frameworks, certification, auditing, and peer review for help (Manatos et al., 2015).

According to Hallinger and Bryant (2013), countries transfer or borrow education reforms, policies, and practices to improve their educational systems and their economic and social conditions. The ministers noted that there are many diverse educational systems in Africa, each built on various legacies. They said Africa's unique cultural and historical legacies have resulted in a lack of reciprocal recognition of various certification systems, insufficient cooperation, and limited student mobility. The approach aims to address these issues.

The African Union Higher Education Programmes (Union, 2007) aim to harmonize higher education on the continent, facilitating the comparability of qualifications awarded across the continent and driving quality assurance measures that will ultimately enhance the quality of higher education in Africa. Creating a platform for qualification benchmarking and comparison will enable professional mobility for employment and further education, as well as increase job markets.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

To achieve acceptability and credibility, African higher education systems and institutions have had to borrow QA frameworks from developed-world higher education systems (Altbach, 2013). Higher education systems in Europe gained greater influence following the Bologna Declaration, which set up a European high-education area and sought to spread it worldwide (Temple, 2010). However, with slower economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, higher education's increased visibility and rising costs caused the quality issue to gain attention. These regional higher education initiatives bear some similarities to the Bologna Process, the European Union's 1999 launch of the European Higher Education Area (Dang, 2015). Several researchers have argued that the Bologna process is vital for increasing global competitiveness and strengthening European integration (Barrett, 2013).

Other regions acknowledge the Bologna process due to its effectiveness in harmonizing higher education at the regional level. Cheng (2018) states that Southeast Asia is a region of eleven sovereign nation-states. However, before they became independent territories or states in the 20th century, most of the continents and oceans were colonial territories of Europe. The Portuguese colonized parts of Malaysia and the Philippines in the 16th century. Dutch and British men colonized some parts of Malaysia and Indonesia in the 17th and 18th centuries, while Frenchmen colonized other parts of Indochina. By the 19th century, Europe had colonized the entire region of Southeast Asia, except Thailand.

Higher education in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s mainly consisted of technical and vocational certification from British professional organizations with local tuition providers or by distance learning. British professional organizations first brought cross-border credit transfers and twinning agreements in the 1980s and 1990s, sponsoring foreign higher education programs in nations like Malaysia and Singapore (Knight & Morshidi, 2011).

During this period, the region experienced a population increase and a growing demand for higher education (YA, 2000). Welch (2012) asserts that limited public funds forced governments in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines to privatize or liberalize their higher education sectors. As Lo (2014) suggests, the QA policies introduced in Singapore in 2009 have played a different role, acting as a tool to reshape the higher education landscape in response to political pressures, particularly the opposition to the previously promoted globalization-focused higher education policy.

Ministries of education either run national QA systems in approximately half of Southeast Asia's nations or are autonomous but partially supported by the government. The East Asian area has paid significant attention to both the economic success of the various economies and the rise in the quality and attractiveness of their HEIs (Allen, 2019). Southeast Asia formed the ASEAN University Network-QQA (AUN-QA) in the late 1990s and founded the ASEAN QA Network in 2008 (RIHED, 2012). Moreover, as a result of the Bologna process in Africa, in 2007, the Association of African Universities (AAU) attempted to establish a framework for an African Higher Education Area (AHEA) (Charlier et al., 2016).

Similarly, to the EU, the main goal of harmonizing higher education in Africa is to improve the sector's quality at the continental level and make the region more competitive globally (Charlier et al., 2016). As part of its integration efforts, the African Union Commission, with the support of the European Commission, initiated several initiatives under the Africa-EU Strategic Partnerships Program (Hahn & Teferra, 2013). ASEAN's membership is comprised of all SEA countries except East Timor. According to Chao (2014), regional policies and initiatives initiated by ASEAN, the EU, and the African Union (AU) appear to influence higher education policies and practices in their member countries differently.

QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND MECHANISMS

Observations made in Africa about the QA framework suggest that it has not resulted in satisfactory outcomes. Some African higher education systems, including those in Africa, constantly report that improving employable skills and research quality are their top priorities This supports the argument that modern QA systems in African higher education seem to be insufficiently addressing the quality issues of these systems. Higher education systems in Africa have strong quality assurance (QA) systems. However, they are not always the best way to deal with the quality problems that African higher education is currently facing. Ansah et al. (2017) say that Ghanaian higher education institutions (HEIs) are not well-studied regarding how QA frameworks are used, especially in universities. This means that there is a lack of information that can be used to make good decisions about how to balance the different goals to improve the outcomes of higher education.

As long as QA frameworks are compatible with context, there is no harm in having global standards to enable comparisons of outcomes in higher education. However, QA also needs to include localized differences to enable comparisons of outcomes. European and African QA frameworks may share the same features. However, at a particular point, they may focus on different areas to balance QA activities to achieve improved outcomes. QA systems need to be rebalanced all the time to stay relevant and keep up with changing quality problems in higher education. Literary works on educational borrowing and lending have mostly focused on primary and secondary education in underdeveloped countries, usually in the form of grants between developed nations or institutions starting from them. Oftentimes, this is the case with decentralized educational reforms transferred from the West, which argue that highly centralized education systems do not address the growing challenges of rapid economic growth and consequently contribute to poverty (Tan, 2012). This is often the case with transferred, decentralized educational reforms. There is an indication of this in the Global South, in which outsourced educational reform tends to disregard the Indigenous community and epistemology, as well as a desire to "transfer decision-making authority, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organizational levels" (Hanson, 1998).

POLICY TRANSFERS IN THE AGE OF REFORM

Khodr (2011) views the process of transferring education reforms as a way to develop education and improve a country's capacity to compete locally and internationally. According to Vasilyeva and Sinagatullin (2020), entering the global educational arena and exchanging ideas and experiences with different educational structures has benefited many countries. Most recently, Anglo-American countries, including the US, Australia, and England, have viewed East Asian societies as an 'education utopia' and have prescribed their methods as 'best practices' (Sellar & Lingard 2013).

We should put more effort into understanding non-Western education beyond 'the West as method' (Takayama 2016), dismantling the dominance of Western-oriented policy actors, and creating open spaces for the contribution of knowledge derived from a variety of cultures and traditions (Silova et al., 2020). In essence, this means looking for an alternative to modernity rather than for an alternative to modernity, as Mignolo (2011) emphasizes.

Some English-speaking countries, such as England, the USA, and Australia, have interpreted imitation as a form of evidence-based policymaking (Sellar & Lingard 2013). As policy players have made East Asia a major source of “advanced" skills and knowledge, the Western world now depends mostly on this region for “advanced" education knowledge. Those who carry out reform policies and those in charge of educational policies must realize the need for context and culture in modifying their implementations. Systems should adapt to cultures rather than forcing cultures to fit into systems. There is always a paradox when borrowing concepts from the West (Romanowski et al., 2018). The goal of these exchanges is to improve countries' educational systems as well as their economic and social conditions (Tan, 2014).

Academic, political, and economic reasons can motivate the transfer of knowledge. Educators borrow guidelines from abroad to implement other related reforms (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) because policymakers use models from other contexts to improve academic provision in their local systems. From an economic perspective, we assume that some systems, especially those in developing countries, engage in policy transfer due to their dependency on external aid. Steiner-Khamsi (2013), however, observed that policy transfers resulting from economic factors can only last until external funding ends.

In the expression ‘as it moves, it changes', Cowen (2009) explores the changes that a policy or idea undergoes when it transfers from one place to another. Accordingly, policy transfer is selective and never wholesale (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Steiner-Khamsi (2007) concluded, based on diffusion studies, that institutions that are late adopters adopt global reforms when they deterritorialize them, transforming them into ‘everyone's for everyone's benefit' (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). As Gershberg and Winkler (2004) argued, analyzing and developing borrowed ideas is less straightforward and more complicated than one thinks: “What is equitable may not be efficient, what is efficient may not be democratic, and what is democratic may not be equitable.".

CONCLUSION

To foster trust and openness among institutions, this paper looks at quality assurance policies in Southeast Asian higher education establishments. The objective is to improve worker mobility and help to acknowledge qualifications. A nation's degree of economic development and its strategic goals in higher education will affect the interactions

among these elements. The design of quality assurance systems in Southeast Asia exhibits variation. However, several have demonstrated efficacy in establishing quality benchmarks and ensuring their fulfillment. Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) argue that the quality of education holds greater significance than the duration of schooling. As the authorized body of the Higher Education institution, the government guarantees a specific level of educational quality and ensures the validity of the degree.

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