

Approaching Accountability in African Agricultural Education:

A contextualized review of evolving practice

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Historic Opportunity

Project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has become a routine component of development interventions. It is not only integral to our accountability culture, but also fundamental for learning organizations. However, systematic learning and the consequent improvement in practices remains largely external to the targeted organizations or systems. The recent development of quality assurance (QA) systems for higher education in Africa provides an excellent opportunity to rectify this practice.

The following key findings are summarized from a review of QA for agricultural education and training (AET) in Africa. *Approaching Accountability in African Agricultural Education* describes the development of this evolving steering mechanism. Review objectives are to:



1. Raise awareness about the important, but currently neglected, role QA for AET plays in African agricultural development and the challenges faced by stakeholders implementing it.
2. Promote M&E for AET projects that articulates with and supports African national efforts to improve the provision of human resources and innovations for agricultural development.

The lessons of this review alert donors, government officials, and AET faculties to the possibilities for collaboration in developing the human and institutional capital for sustained agricultural development in Africa. The paper does not try to define benchmarks or indicators. Rather, it presents a context and approach for their local negotiation and application.

Context-Driven Development

QA has its origins in the practices of US universities during the mid-20th century. Since then the global context for tertiary education has transformed. Recent studies demonstrate the importance of quality education in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) for agricultural development leading to economic growth. Employers seek youth who are job ready with employable skills and the critical thinking necessary for implementing the newest innovations.

In Africa, the number of tertiary institutions has exploded. They face increasing demands for access as well as program relevance. These changes have been accompanied by an increasing division of labor and technological sophistication in production, processing and distribution, and a shift to the knowledge economy. Furthermore, globalization in the economic sphere has been shadowed by globalization in governance.

In the decades after independence, the self-governing model of academic professionals in Africa disintegrated. The obligation of the first and second generations of African faculties to produce bureaucrats for the government faded with

the collapse of economic growth. by the 1980s, the external obligation involved little more than the occasional arbitrary interference of politicians. Resources allocated to higher education decreased and internal quality assurance deteriorated.

Yet, AET graduates are expected to effectively populate agribusiness value-chains, as well as maintain and enhance the natural resource base. The increasing complexity of production systems and the rapidity of technological change has transformed AET objectives and the practices to achieve them. Mastery of static subject matter and expert-centered education no longer suffices. New pedagogical practices for active student learning are required to provide a nation's human capital. Consequently, the steering mechanism for AET institutions, as all tertiary education in Africa, must adapt to this new reality.

Command and control of AET institutions by ministry officials is no longer viable. AET administrators and their faculties are coming under increased scrutiny by multiple publics: businesses, NGOs, donor organizations, parents and students, as well as ministry officials. This new scrutiny and associated expectations have been formalized through new fora. Traditional academic leadership in AET, once languishing under the control of government bureaucrats, is being acknowledged and granted increased institutional autonomy. However, to counter balance this new academic freedom, accountability to the various publics is being ensured through the creation of quasi-governmental QA agencies and their accompanying accreditation apparatus.

Quality Assurance - a steering mechanism

QA is the steering mechanism ensuring that AET stakeholders' interests are taken into account and quality improvements made by the professionals responsible for supplying the human capital and technologies for sustained agricultural development. The obligation for accountability is both external and internal. A combination of internal and external QA is how transparency, effectiveness, and trust can be cultivated. In seeking to improve the quality of AET practices, effective communication is required for professionals to explain and justify their conduct, for fora to pose the right questions and pass judgements, and for stakeholders to participate in negotiated solutions for continued improvement. Mutual respect and understanding are critical to achieving lasting results.

African Experiences with Quality Assurance Documented

African governments have been taking an increasing interest in QA mechanisms for tertiary education. By 2012, 21 countries had established QA agencies with a dozen or more on the way. Findings analyzed in this review are drawn from regional assessments as well as studies of QA systems in Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Mozambique, and in-depth analysis of QA implementation experiences in Liberia and Senegal.

African governments have developed QA agencies to perform several functions:

- assess institutions and/or programs;
- approve public and private tertiary institutions;
- approve new academic programs;
- establish minimum academic standards;
- carry out annual performance reviews; and
- monitor and accredit institutions and programs.

National quality assurance may target either institutions or programs. Two types of QA assessment are carried out.

Although variations in terminology exist, they all refer to similar processes. Audits (as used here) refer to an institution's own standards, whereas accreditation focuses on standards external to the institution. Audits depend on program self-studies and are often incorporated into accreditation reports. The basis for accreditation rests on a process and benchmarks. The general outline for the process has become quite standardized around a set of procedures (adapted regionally by IUCEA, CAMES, and AAU), which include but are not limited to:

- a self-study;
- an external peer review;
- a site visit;
- a site-visit report; and
- a resulting accreditation decision.

The conduct for which AET institutions are now being held accountable is multidimensional, involving both academic content and administrative procedures. The range and

scale of assessment have broadened as publics and their fora have become more sophisticated in conduct specification and measurement. Initially addressing issues of 'fitness for purpose' was sufficient for institutional accreditation. However, the need for educational reform has led to questions about program specifics. Internal QA assessments increasingly address academic core issues concerning:

- critical subject matter changes,
- improved pedagogical practices,
- student learning,
- proper resourcing, and
- student placement.

Self-study audits and accreditation provide both a process and structure for faculty, students, and administrators to discuss program strengths and weaknesses, present rationales justifying their behavior, and identify opportunities for improvement.

Contemporary AET institutions are faced with complex obligations to multiple publics. Administrators are coming to terms with how the quality of their students is perceived by an array of market-based actors. Market-based and ICT adjustments for increased numbers of students are also being made. Building or restoring the public trust in AET institutions has required that administrators and faculties become more transparent and effectively communicate their professionalism to skeptical publics.

Quality Assurance Pathway and Narrative

The QA pathway to achieving sustained agricultural development passes through the following processes (see Figure)

1. The ministry provides inputs (material and budgetary resources) and contracts with AET institutions at the national level.
2. The QA agency verifies institutional inputs and their proper administration.
3. Well-trained and supported professionals provide research, instruction and community service.
4. The QA agency assesses research, pedagogical, and community involvement to ensure:
 - a. up-to-date knowledge, its generation and transfer;
 - b. routine self-study and peer review; and
 - c. scientific standards and academic integrity.
5. QA system outputs include:
 - a. stakeholder relevant research; and
 - b. active student learning.
6. These outputs in turn create technological innovation and value-added for sustained development in agri-food system outcomes:
 - a. employment with increased incomes;
 - b. technological innovation; and
 - c. agricultural development.

This dynamic steering mechanism provides reliable external accountability, while ensuring local ownership and validity. The national QA agency channels external expectations concerning conduct (benchmarks); while internal QA is managed locally by faculty self-study committees. Peer review provides the mechanism for validating progress, sharing successes, and exchanging national best practices. With a clear and mutual understanding on institutional capabilities and improvement potentials, contracts can be negotiated between the ministry and the institution. Implementation of annual contracts renews the generation of high quality agricultural leaders and labor force leading to sustainable impacts: increased incomes, technological innovation, and agricultural development.

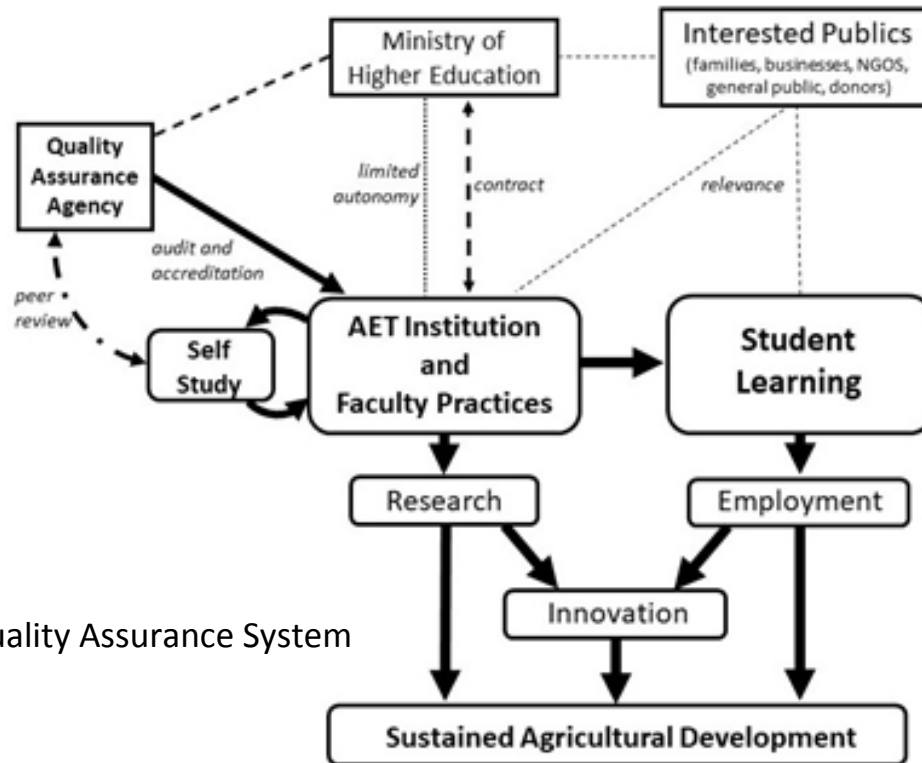


Figure 1: AET Quality Assurance System

Challenges Along the Pathway to Quality Culture

When conducting self-assessments one quickly realizes that the pathway to improvement not only consists of curriculum development and pedagogical practices, but that the underlying working conditions, incentive structures, and governance systems are intimately involved. Four themes identified in this review play a foundational role in the development of a quality culture. Those themes are:

- **the character and content of the academic core:** focusing on the role of the university in generating and/or transmitting knowledge and skills for development;
- **faculty practices and morale:** highlighting individual self-perceptions as either an academic professional, a government employee, or a private contractor;
- **governance structures and incentives:** addressing the extent to which they are driven by academic concerns, market forces, and/or state development priorities; and
- **infrastructure and financial resources:** focusing on redressing institutional underinvestment and raising recurrent expenditures per student.

The first two of these are intimately interdependent in that both the content and the techniques of instruction for which faculty members are responsible are co-evolving. The latter two drive the motivations for improved performance.

Lessons Learned

Approaching Accountability frames the problem of QA in African AET at the tertiary level. African institutions of higher education face challenges of overpopulation, declining budgets, and privatization. Although showing signs of economic dynamism, African societies still face poverty and a growing youth bulge. These challenges were decades in the making and will take decades to overcome. Nevertheless, the African agri-food system is ready to hire job ready, problem solving youth to stimulate innovation and productivity gains. It is time for AET institutions to step up. To do this they will need resources and links to the private sector, good leadership, faculty re-training, and a steering mechanism. QA is that steering mechanism.

Some key findings:

1. QA for AET plays a critical, but relatively neglected role in African agricultural development.
2. The QA narrative indicates the pathway for renewed investment in AET.
3. Accountability is both internal through peer review and collegial criticism, and external through reference to benchmark standards and institutional contracts.
4. Market mechanisms have come to dominate higher education governance and finance with some positive effects, however, privatization has not been supportive of rural, agricultural and STEM-based education.
5. For quality improvement in AET to occur, underinvestment in agricultural tertiary education must be reversed. A substantial increase in the recurrent expenditures per student is required.

The Way Forward

African AET faculties need new pedagogical models and opportunities to adapt their institutions and individual instructor practices. Such a transformation in AET toward STEM, critical thinking and entrepreneurship skills will involve substantial investment in human capital. This cannot be sustainably achieved without investing in the accompanying institutional capital. Mobilizing faculty for this transformation implies strong leadership and a governance system that restores faculty morale and increases autonomy. Of course, given the time horizon for this development, multiple publics will also need to be assured that progress is being made. Two-way transparency must be achieved. Contracts are necessary to specify inputs and output expectations. However, it is the recognition and application of the combined internal and external QA systems that will build the steering mechanism that ensures trust for sustained performance improvement.

While investment and recurrent expenditures in faculty development will be required to transform AET, three activity areas where donor technical assistance could most profitably facilitate the development of QA in local contexts include:

- training peer review personnel;
- developing adequate data storage and retrieval systems and training associated data management personnel;
- establishing context-based standards for benchmarking.

Reference:

Moore, Keith M. (2017) *Approaching Accountability in African Agricultural Education: A contextualized review of evolving practice*. USAID/InnovATE, OIRED/Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. pp. 56. URL: http://www.oired.vt.edu/innovate/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Accountability-in-African-Agricultural-Education_FINAL_62117.pdf