Institutional Self-Assessment: A Tool for Agricultural Education and Training Program Improvement

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There is a lot of talk these days about Quality Assurance (QA) in agricultural education and training (AET). Throughout academia, QA has been praised as the pathway for improved student learning. Furthermore, QA is integral to institutional and program accreditation for higher education. Central to QA is the self-assessment.

A Valued Tool

Self-assessment is the heart of an institution's 'quality assurance culture'. It is a critical tool for fostering conversation and improving communication within an organization. Since the process is internally driven, faculty not only have a vested interest in its success, but also are in control. This structured self-reflection process encourages scrutiny of and planning for program implementation. Key actions can be identified and aligned with program goals and the capacity to monitor progress. In addition, self-assessment provides a mechanism to demonstrate accountability to external authorities, the public, and donors. Mastery of self-assessment procedures builds the confidence and skills necessary for faculty and administrators to improve AET programming, prepare for accreditation reviews, and develop winning proposals for donor support.

Students at the Forestry Training Institute in Tubmanburg, Liberia, which undertook an institutional self-assessment to revise the curriculum, student handbook and code of conduct. Photo Credit OIRED, Virginia Tech.

Benefits of institutional self-assessments include:

- Improving the quality of student learning
- Establishing a basis for program improvement and growth
- Building political support for programs
- Facilitating development of local, national, and international partnerships
- Providing a blue print for targeting funding
- Creating a vision for the college/institution

This is not an accreditation exercise, but the process is similar and prepares each participating institution to move in that direction. The resulting report constitutes a foundation for continued self-reflection, targets specific areas for improvement, and provides a baseline for monitoring progress. Self-assessment reports belong to the institution that prepares them.

Implementing the Self-Assessment Process

The self-assessment process is based on an adaptation of professional university program accreditation procedures (IUCEA) providing standards for benchmarking the measurement of excellence in professional agriculture and natural resource management education. Experience across the world indicates that the self-assessment process unfolds through conversations, meetings, and report writing over a period of six to nine months. The process involves the documentation of current conditions, analysis of the findings, and completion of the report.

The institution or program's self-assessment team is composed of members of the organization's faculty and staff. This team collects, documents and reviews data with respect to a set of questions structured according to six standards (see below). These standards provide a reporting framework for the team's analysis, interpretation, and conclusions concerning the program/institution's strengths and weaknesses. The completed report should be reviewed by a team of external experts. After the external assessment team reads the report, they make a visit to meet with faculty and students, validate the findings, and discuss future options for the program. The self-assessment report also provides a framework and rationale for a 10-year strategic plan to strengthen agricultural education, secure adequate funding, and promote new programs.

Validation of the results with the faculty, students, and external stakeholders requires an honest and transparent assessment. If some information is not available, this should be noted.

Self-Assessment Testimonials

The Director of Studies for **the Department of Agroforestry at the *Université Assan Seck de Ziguinchor* (UASZ) in Senegal** praised the self-assessment process for having brought faculty together to constructively discuss the content and interdependence of their courses leading to important curriculum revisions.

At first, faculty at the **Forestry Training Institute (FTI) in Tubmanburg, Liberia** struggled with the documentation process involved in their self-assessment. However, it ultimately provoked productive discussions about how they could modernize their outdated curriculum. Two years later, the FTI Director excitedly announced their submission of a revised curriculum that included new courses, restructured programs, and a new student handbook and code of conduct.

At the *Ecole Supérieur de Formation Agricole et Rurale* **(ESFAR) in Senegal**, the Director of Studies noted that the self-assessment exercise prepared them to develop a strategic plan that resulted in a re-structuring of academic departments and greatly facilitated the formal evaluation and accreditation of those programs.

The *Centre National de Formation Technique des Eaux, Forêts, Chasses et la Protection de la Nature* (CNFTEFCPN) in Senegal found the process to be exceedingly useful. It allowed them to better understand how their programs were operating, specifically clarifying each faculty member's roles and responsibilities and recognizing contradictions and anomalies, and interrelationships between their courses. The Director of Studies stressed how this problem solving greatly improved faculty morale, making his job much easier.

Standards for Self-Assessment

The criteria for higher education assessment are based on six standards. These "standards" are not explicit benchmarks, rather they are categories of fundamental issues to be adapted for consideration in the analysis of a specific organization. Building on initial findings, faculty and administration can agree on a set of baseline indicators that best characterize their programs current condition and planned trajectory.

Standard I: Mission, Goals, and Objectives of the Program: It is essential to clearly understand and document the formally agreed mission, goals and objectives of the program. The assessment of subsequent standards is made with reference to these values.

Standard II: Program Curriculum: A catalog and consideration of program components: general education subject areas of math/science, humanities, communication, team work, and computer skills; use of syllabi and other pedagogic practices; and specialized professional subject matter.

Standard III: Program Organization and Administration: Review program policies, resources, and procedures for managing administrative, faculty and student concerns, including outcome assessment and how the interests of students and outside constituents are represented.

Standard IV: Faculty: Documentation that faculty (including non-permanent faculty) have a diversity of experiences and educational qualifications relevant to program areas. In addition, faculty time allocation, course assignments, and personnel policies are considered.

Standard V: Students: Data on student enrollment, graduation rates, and graduate placement by gender and other measures of diversity are collected and reviewed. The role and importance of student advising should also be included.

Standard VI: Institutional Support: Parent institution support (including annual budget) for facilities, faculty, and students, as well as computers, spatial information technologies, specialized laboratories, field instruction, and activities to generate additional resources.

Resources

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