The Accreditation Process and Challenges of Private Religious Based Universities in Uganda

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Abstract: The quantitative growth in Ugandan higher education subsector has created many challenges including a drop in quality in education delivery. Today, there are 34 universities in Uganda (up from 26 in 2006) with over 185,000 students (up from 137,190), representing an overall growth rate of more than 15% in the last 5 years. Given this rapid expansion of higher education, some form of regulation is necessary to assure quality. Ugandan government established the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) as a regulatory agency to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary education institutions in Uganda create, sustain and improve the relevance and quality of higher education for all qualified Ugandans and to meet the local, national and global higher education challenges of the 21st century. In addition to sustaining and improving the relevance and quality of higher education, these religious based universities have a special mission of evangelism and discipleship and view all admissions and appointments as opportunities for ministry and service. This however, may not go well with the peer assessors and the Accrediting Agencies. Currently there are more than six recognised faith based universities in Uganda. Out of the seven fully accredited universities in Uganda, five are faith based and only two are secular. There are different views about the philosophies of these faith-based universities. Some people seem to suggest that they pay more attention to evangelism and discipleship than in provision of higher education. While others view this type of institutions as a very good model to provide good morals and education that can transform the society in a positive way. At the same time, the regulatory framework in the country must provide for an all-inclusive environment for all to participate in higher education which may pose a big challenge to these faith based institutions. This article therefore, discusses the accreditation process in Uganda and challenges of private religious based Universities in Uganda in regards to accreditation.

Keywords: Accreditation, Quality Assurance, Higher Education Institution.

1. Introduction

There is a growing number of faith based higher education institutions (HEIs) in Uganda. Although it is generally looked at as better managed and more successful than the secular ones, these institutions face challenges in getting accreditation and maintaining the status required by the national higher education regulation since some of the requirements conflict with the main mission and identity. This article presents mechanisms put in place to provide quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions in Uganda and the challenges of private Religious Based Universities in Uganda as they undergo the accreditation process. It discusses how quality assurance and accreditation in the Ugandan context is provided and the challenges met by the Religious Based Universities with a view of sharing of experience and available opportunities.

1.1 Accreditation

In higher education, accreditation is defined as a process of external quality review used by recognized agencies to scrutinize higher education and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. In a similar view, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) defines accreditation in higher education as a process based on self- and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. This means that peers assess the quality of an institution or academic program and assist the faculty and staff in improvement (Eaton, 2011).

In Uganda, accreditation in higher education is carried out by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in order to provide quality assurance to the general public, students and their families, sponsoring bodies, governments, and employers. Accreditation is also important in the sense that it provides mechanisms for quality improvement in tertiary institutions and

universities. NCHE uses accreditation in reference to institutional accreditation and program accreditation by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education institutions and their academic and professional programs.

1.2 Quality Assurance

Rapid growth in enrollments amidst declining budgets during the 1980s and 1990s, the proliferation of private provision of higher education especially in the last decade and pressure from a rapidly transforming labor market have combined to raise new concerns about quality. Uganda, like other countries has become conscious of the need for effective quality assurance and quality improvement. Quality assurance in education is the mechanism put in place to guarantee that the education is "fit for purpose" i.e, is good. This involves planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for education service will be fulfilled. Since its establishment, after the enactment of The Universities and Other Tertiary Intuitions Act 2001, NCHE has made significant progress in regulating the establishment and activities of universities.

The National Council for Higher Education (www.unche.or.ug) was established to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary education institutions in Uganda will create, sustain and improve the relevance and quality of higher education. The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (No. 7) of 2001 is the law that was enacted to establish NCHE for higher education in Uganda. In 2006, NCHE developed a quality assurance framework4 and accreditation system for institutions of higher learning in Uganda. The quality assurance framework developed by NCHE contains important benchmarks used for assessing quality of higher education. All higher education institutions must adhere to these benchmarks when they are ensuring quality of education. While NCHE uses these benchmarks to determine the quality of education provided by higher education institutions, Institutions, which are accredited by NCHE, will normally have met a set of minimum standards determined by NCHE on the basis of these benchmarks provided in the quality assurance framework. The following sections of this paper will highlight major regulatory tools contained in this framework to share experiences of challenges and opportunities in the area of quality assurance and accreditation of Private Universities in Uganda.

1.3 Ministry and Service

While the accreditation agencies are concerned about the relevance and level of quality that meets the minimum standards, these Religious based universities have a special mission of evangelism and discipleship and view all admissions and appointments as opportunities for ministry and service. This however, may not go well with the peer assessors and the Accrediting Agencies. For these

universities to do their mission well, they must tailor it to their policies which may be viewed as discriminative. Some of these policies include:

a) The University Recruitment Policy which requires that all full-time and permanent members of staff do demonstrate a mature commitment to their religious beliefs.

b) Integration of Faith and Teaching which requires that all Academic Programs teach Religious based course units like Old Testament, New Testament, Christian World View and teach all other course units from a religious perspective.

This however, may not go well with the peer assessors and the Accrediting Agencies since there is no general guidelines on such.

2. Background of Study

This study was mainly based on the secondary sources where a combination of qualitative and quantitative approached were used to arrive at the results. National council for higher education carries out research and regular data collection for its annual s*tate of the higher education* publication. This article utilises information generated from these collection and publications. Experiential knowledge has also been used to prepare this article.

2.1 Global and domestic forces

The content and delivery of higher education have been transformed in the last decade by a number of global and domestic forces. These forces, which have impacted on and transformed higher education, include globalization, increasing use of the new technologies in higher education and its delivery (ICTs, biotechnology, nanotechnology, etc), mass access to higher education and the entrance of market forces in higher education delivery. University education has shifted from being the preserve of the elite to a service open to the masses. By 2000, there were at least 80 million students worldwide taught by 3.5 million professionals in various categories of higher education institutions (World Bank: 2000, Altbach 2000). This number is increasing at a faster rate than ever before. For instance, it is forecasted that the number of students around the globe enrolled in higher education will more than double to 262 million by 2025 (Maslen 2012).

The number of university institutions has also increased tremendously. In 1960, Africa had six universities, mainly producing graduates for employment as civil servants. Today, there are about three hundred and fifty university institutions in Africa with more than half a million students. About thirty five per cent of these institutions are private (i.e., non-government). In Uganda, there was only one university in 1987 with about 10,000 students. Today, there are 34 universities (up from 26 in 2006) with over 185,000 students (up from 137,190), representing an

overall growth rate of more than 15% in the last 5 years (National Council for Higher Education: 2010).

2.2 Regulatory agency in higher education

Given this rapid expansion of higher education, some form of regulation is necessary to assure quality (Newman, 2011). Regulatory agencies discharge a public interest on behalf of government in economic and social affairs. Following the example of the United States since at least the 1930s, governments elsewhere, including Uganda, increasingly have delegated authority for market control forces, market enhancement and social protection to independent agencies rather than exercising such functions directly from government departments. These agencies generally are not usually fully independent, although often possessing statutory rights and duties, but are appointed and accountable to legislatures through ministers – it is rather a form of independence within government (King, 2006). The NCHE was established as a regulatory agency under the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 to, inter alia;

i. Regulate and guide the establishment and management of institutions of higher learning; and
ii. Regulate the quality of higher education, equate qualifications and advise government on higher education issues.

NCHE has a quality assurance5 department, which is a core unit of NCHE and handles accreditation of institutions and accreditation of programs and monitoring, among others. The Quality Assurance Framework for universities and licensing process for higher education institutions (first published in 2008 and revised in 2011) was developed to ensure that NCHE and higher education provides guidelines on implementation of quality assurance mechanisms. The Quality Assurance Framework comprises of two major components:

a) The regulatory component at the level of the NCHE and the
b) Institutional component at each individual university level. The regulatory component of this framework highlights the role of NCHE in meeting the aims for which it was created.

A number of regulations (as explained in section 3.1) have been developed to in pursuance of this in order to provide mechanisms for institutional accreditation, program accreditation, merit-based admission, credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS), quality of teaching staff (qualifications), examination regulation & assessment, students' assessment of academic staff, institutions infrastructure, collaboration with professional bodies, regulating cross-border higher education & e-learning, etc. Meanwhile the institutional component provides measures for quality assurance at institutional level where institutions are supposed to develop internal audit system in order to provide quality measures and control. The Institutional audit encourages institutions to cultivate and maintain a culture of continuous performance improvement.

After every five years, institutions will be required to undergo internal and external audits. The institution itself with the guidance of the NCHE will carry out the internal audit. At the institution's request, the NCHE will provide the training of "the academic auditors," the criteria, the portfolio (report) framework and any other technical guidance. The actual process of the internal audit exercise will be left to individual institutions. Each institution will have at least one academic year to complete the internal audit but must submit the report portfolio to the NCHE within two years from the date it was requested to start the internal audit exercise.

After reviewing the institution's portfolio, NCHE will determine the nature of the external audit to be carried out in a given institution. The institution will participate in the process of designing the external audit, including giving views on the names of the proposed peers for the external auditing task. The external audit shall be completed two years after the completion of the internal audit. The two audits will, therefore, take four years. The fifth year will be used to address any identified challenges in the internal and external auditors' reports.

As a result, universities have been trained and encouraged to established Quality Assurance units as a means of implementing the Quality Assurance Framework. The institutional audit system helps in monitoring the following aspects of the Universities; institutional governance & their functions, quality of teaching and learning, quality of academic staff, sufficiency of educational facilities, research and publication, quality of outputs, institutional financial management, the university and community engagement.

3. Institutional Accreditation in Uganda

Institutional accreditation in the context of Uganda, refers to permitting institutions to exist and deliver higher education in Uganda and used as a key tool of quality assurance, normally by granting a charter in the case of university accreditation and certificate of classification and registration in the case of other tertiary institutions. Before they are fully accredited, institutions are assessed at various stages to ascertain whether or not they are likely to provide quality higher education. Assessment normally covers all aspects of institutions, including land, staffing, educational facilities, governance, financial resources and physical facilities.

3.1 Regulations

The provisions of the University and other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 empowers the NCHE to make regulations to ensure the provision of quality higher education. Accordingly, the NCHE has issued a number of Statutory Instruments to guide its processes of

accrediting higher education institutions. Some of these relevant subsidiary laws are:

a) Statutory Instrument No. 80 of 2005: Establishment and Operation of Private Universities and Private Tertiary Institutions Regulations, 2005.

b) Statutory Instrument No. 85 of 2005: Institutional Standards Regulations, 2005

c) Statutory Instrument No. 1 of 2007: Naming of Universities, Other Degree Awarding Institutions and Other Tertiary Institutions Regulations, 2007

d) Statutory Instrument No. 61 of 2007: Letter of Interim Authority for Private Universities and Provisional Licenses for Private Other Degree Awarding Institutions Regulations, 2007.

e) Statutory Instrument No. 63 of 2007: Minimum Entry Requirements for Admission to Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Regulations, 2007.

f) Statutory Instrument No 34 of 2008: Quality Assurance Regulations, 2008

3.2 Types of higher education institutions in Uganda NCHE defines three categories of higher education institutions as follows:

(i) University

(ii) Other Degree Awarding Institution

(iii) Other Tertiary Institution

Universities and other degree awarding institutions go through three stages to get fully accredited i.e. letter of interim authority, provisional license and charter whereas other tertiary institutions, which normally offer diplomas and certificates, go through only two stages to get fully accredited i.e. provisional license and certificate of classification and registration. In this paper we will concentrate only on the University accreditation process.

3.2.1 Letter of Interim Authority

As per the Statutory Instrument No. 61 of 2007, the first stage of accreditation of a Private University in Uganda is Letter of Interim Authority. Accordingly, the promoter of a Private University project must apply to NCHE for a Letter of Interim Authority to establish and operate a Private University. When Application is granted, a Letter of Interim Authority becomes valid for a period of up to three years during which the holder of the authority shall not admit students into the university but shall;

a) mobilize funds;

b) acquire requisite infrastructure and academic facilities;

c) organize academic and administrative human infrastructure;

d) do any other thing that may further the development of the proposed university to maturity.

Meanwhile NCHE shall, within the three year period prescribed under the law, monitor the private university project to establish its viability for grant of a provisional license.

3.2.2 Provisional License

The second stage of accreditation of a private University in Uganda is a provisional license (provided for in Statutory Instrument No. 80 of 2005). When NCHE is satisfied with the progress of a Private University project (holder of Letter of Interim Authority) and upon application for a Provisional License to establish and operate a Private University by the promoter of a Private University project, a Provisional License may be granted. An application for such a Provisional License is normally accompanied by a project proposal containing the information and particulars specified in the regulation. An Inspection Committee is appointed by the NCHE to verify the information in the application form. The members and employees of the National Council shall not be members of the Inspection Committee but may accompany the Inspection Committee for the provision of information and administrative support.

The aim of the Inspection Committee is to thoroughly assess whether the Institution's capacity is adequate as per the capacity indicators specified by the NCHE. This normally covers the following:

i. Land in terms of size & title

ii. Governance (Council, Senate, Management Board)

iii. Academic programs & staff to teach

iv. Infrastructure (classroom, library, conference hall, workshop, demonstration rooms, laboratory etc.)

v. Facilities like computers, reference textbooks, furniture, etc

vi. Financial status in terms of sources of revenue, budgeting and financial mechanism in place to control finances

vii. Strategic Plan and how the plan is being implemented

The inspection report8 prepared by the Inspection Committee under law normally forms the basis upon which the National Council decides whether or not to grant a Provisional License.

If application is approved by NCHE, the name and particulars of such a Private University is published in the Gazette, the University is issued with a Provisional

License and the NCHE monitors the Private University to establish its viability for accreditation. Unlike the Letter of Interim Authority, the Provisional License is valid for at least three years before which period, the University can't apply for full accreditation.

3.2.3 Charter

The third and the last stage of accreditation of a Private University in Uganda is the Charter (also provided for in Statutory Instrument No. 80 of 2005). Where a Private University has been issued with a Provisional License and has held the license for not less than three years, the Private University may apply to the National Council for the grant of a Charter and accreditation. The process is the same as that of the Provisional License except that it is more rigorous.

4. Program Accreditation in Uganda

Program accreditation is one of the core activities of the National Council for Higher Education. After the amendment of The Universities and Other Tertiary Intuitions Act in 2006, NCHE has embarked on accreditation of programs of study in higher education institutions in the country. Section 119 A of the Act9 as amended states: "For the avoidance of doubt, no person shall operate a University, other Degree Awarding Institution or a Tertiary Institution without the prior accreditation of its academic and professional programs by the National Council for Higher Education".

4.1 Importance of Program Accreditation

Accreditation of University programs is a process based on self and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. Peers assess the quality of an institution in terms of academic or professional program and assist the faculty and staff in effecting improvement.

NCHE conducts a robust process of program accreditation that starts with assessment by the institution itself and concludes with the approval of the Council of NCHE. Therefore, assessing an academic or professional program is very important because it leads its accreditation hence giving assurance of quality to all stakeholders. After understanding what goes on during assessment of program of study, one would appreciate the reason why NCHE and higher education institutions should pay great attention to program assessment.

Every institution of higher learning is expected to have a quality assurance unit, which, is supposed to provide quality check and control in an institution. By subjecting a program to a thorough check right from the quality assurance unit in the institution until NCHE approves it,

we ensure that what is designed to be taught is of quality and fit for public consumption.

When a program is submitted to the Council –usually through an office responsible for academic affairs, NCHE uses these experts to do thorough assessment before evaluating for the purpose of accreditation. Normally NCHE draws experts from sections of society; academia, professional bodies, and industry specialists both nationally and internationally.

Assessing these programs normally involves looking at the following; the resolution of institution's Senate and Council approving the program to be offered; the name of the program; the full course outline with name of course, brief description of the course, objectives of the course, expected outcomes, duration of the course, year when it is taught, delivery methods and the methods of assessment; the full course contents with credit units and contact hours; the names of academic staff together with their qualifications; the resources available to assist in the teaching: library, IT etc; the infrastructure available: lecture rooms, library space, and office space for staff and any other materials deemed useful. All this makes it possible for NCHE to determine whether or not the institution will deliver a quality program.

When a program is assessed and report produced, NCHE secretariat studies this report and evaluates it. Programs with positive evaluation are recommended to the Accreditation and Quality Assurance committee of the Council for consideration. Therefore without assessment, it is impossible to give full accreditation and without accreditation, it is illegal to offer any program of study for which the public should enroll.

The assessment of programs also gives NCHE a good view of what is in the institutions. For example, in recent assessments it was discovered that many programs submitted for accreditation lacked certain important ingredients that should make them provide required quality. Therefore NCHE organized skills development training for resources personnel in the institutions. This training was intended to equip all resource persons involved in program development at higher education institutions with skills that should help in improving the quality of programs in higher education institutions.

5. Challenges met by the Religious Based Private Universities

i. Funding Funding has been an outstanding challenge to higher education institutions in Uganda, like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, as pointed out in different studies (Kajubi, 1992; Kasozi, 2009). Many Universities rely heavily on students' fees, which is not always sufficient to run Universities activities. Virtually all institutions in

the country get less money than is needed for producing a graduate. That is, most of them get less than the unit cost. Only a few have diversified sources of income such as endowments, loan schemes, etc. The would be funders often question the purpose of their religious based policies and look at them as discriminative. This has been re-enforced by the divergent beliefs, eg the bi-sexual movement within the Anglican Communion, leading to further withdrawal of funding from their institutions.

ii. Staffing of the Accrediting Agency (NCHE) has remained small- hence relying on experts from outside. This jeopardizes the uniformity of the assessment and brings in bias from those with divergent beliefs.

iii. Insufficient numbers of academic staff, especially those committed and acquainted with religious principles which have fractured the progress of most of the religious based Universities in Uganda. The academic numbers have not kept pace with student enrolment growth. While student numbers grew by 34.1% in the four-year period (from 2006 to 2010), staff numbers grew by only 20% representing staff student ratio of 1:24 (National Council for Higher Education: 2010).

iv. Staff Qualifications are lower than what NCHE requires. This is because of reduced and insufficient funding. Universities need more highly qualified staff. In the study by NCHE (National Council for Higher Education, 2010), staff with PhDs were only 11%, meanwhile those with Masters and Bachelors as the highest qualifications were 38% and 34% respectively. The rest of staff members have various types of Diplomas.

v. Infrastructure situation in almost all Religious Based Private Universities in Uganda has remained bad in the last five years. For example, in the last publication by NCHE (National Council for Higher Education: 2010), University lecture rooms space dropped from average of 0.78m2 to 0.34m2 and library space 0.28m2 to 0.13m2 both falling below the standard set by the NCHE

vi. Educational facilities including computer and Internet access, books, etc has been improving but has not yet reached the level required by NCHE.

vii. Research and publications have dwindled in most of the Universities in Uganda mostly due to funding gap and lack of motivation for research. There is a big problem in scholarly communication skills and language issues within the higher education institutions in Uganda (Alice, 2012).

viii. Management crisis is still challenge in most Ugandan universities, religious based or not. There are a lot of internal wrangles because of poor management practices. The tales of intrigue and fights among the university's staff contributes to low quality of education. The other common issue within Ugandan institutions in fighting for power

and control where those who hold power want to cling on it for long and those who are without it use all means to acquire it.

ix. Gender equity remains a challenge in all Ugandan universities (private and public universities alike). This includes the access of women to higher education and the changes that female students and staff face.

x. The rate at which information /instructional materials become obsolete is too high for Private institutions to cope.

xi. Large enrolment of students has impacted badly on academic quality in most Universities in Uganda. Since most of these institutions rely heavily on funds generated through fees, they have resorted to increasing numbers of students without matching with the facilities and staff available

xii. Methods of delivering knowledge are rapidly changing from dependence on traditional ink and paper, chalk and blackboard to the digital form. This poses great challenge in the sense that many are forced to adopt the new methods in which they are not competent hence leading to inefficiency and quality drop due to improper use of these new methods

xiii. Students' background knowledge is one of the factors that are affecting quality of education in Ugandan higher education institutions. The quality of teaching at lower levels of educations have largely dropped such that most of the students joining universities are not competent enough to effectively and meaningfully learn on their own. Most of the students depend largely on teachers due to the type of teaching that is done at lower levels.

xiv. Equal opportunities for access remain a big challenge in faith based institutions. Whereas these institutions would like to have only particular type of students, administrators and teachers and yet the national accreditation requirement stipulates equal opportunities for all who qualify for higher education to access it.

Conclusion

Because of the quantitative growth in the higher education subsector in Uganda, the role of a national regulatory agency has become very significant to all who understand higher education. In Uganda, accreditation process is applied to all higher education institutions regardless of the founding body.. Although this accreditation has become a challenge to all universities in Uganda, religious based private universities have had more and specific challenges that need to be specifically addressed. In this paper, we have highlighted that since religious based institutions have specific mission and objects that differ from the main national objectives of higher education subsector. As a result, these faith-based institutions face a lot of challenges in addition to those which face all private institutions in the country in trying to get full accreditation

from the national regulatory agency given that the requirements set for accreditation conflict with the core mission of the founding bodies of these institutions.

Even when these challenges are faced by these religious based private universities; there are still many opportunities for the quality of university education in Uganda to be turned around. This paper discussed the efforts put up by the government through the regulatory agency to address the issue of quality assurance and accreditation of private universities, specifically the religious based. We hope that this can form basis for useful discussions by different stakeholders to help improve the situation as much as possible.

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