A global South perspective of quality as human development

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About this brief

This research brief is based on a study conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Zimbabwean higher education institutions. Although Zimbabwe is used as a case study, the research is relevant to other countries, especially in the global South which are developing and improving their higher education quality assurance systems. The brief is addressed to national and university policymakers, researchers, academics and students interested in the conceptualisation and operationalization of quality in higher education teaching and learning (T & L).

Context

Human capital perspectives dominate what constitutes quality higher education. This results in an emphasis on the technical and efficient use of resources in order to favourably position universities in a global market. Consequently, quantitative indicators in the form of inputs and outputs are used as a proxy for quality. Such inputs include numbers of qualified lecturers, resources such as ICT systems and books, while outputs comprise graduate employability and, or attributes, academic publications and university rankings in league tables.

These indicators unfavourably position most global South universities. Although important, human capital creation is not the only role that universities ought to play in promoting development. Conceptions of quality should be contextually relevant and promote national and global human development.

Human development and the capabilities approach

Unlike a singular focus on economic development, human development foregrounds human flourishing. In some instances, especially in developing countries, economic growth is necessary in availing a minimum threshold of resources, making it instrumental in achieving human development rather than it being the intended outcome. Aimed at human development, the capabilities approach enables an alternative lens to reductionist economic growth by investigating human development and capability aspirations and gaps.

Conceptualising quality as human development

Ideally, universities should be accountable to the public and contribute to knowledge generation, skills development and the inculcation of normative values. Given the plurality of human development values, the research project identified "critical being" and "the capability for work" as meta-capabilities which enable graduates to positively live and act in the world beyond higher education. These capabilities rely on personal characteristics such as confidence and agency as well as enabling social and institutional environments which allow peoples' concerns to be heard and which foster their capabilities.

Barnett's (1997) "thick" notion of critical being comprises critical thinking, critical self-reflection and critical action as a complex state of being in which each succeeding level offers a higher form of alternative possibilities of understanding. Critical being is not just an individual action or mental state but situates the self in relation to society thus linking it to agency, voice and participation. It involves criticality in the areas of knowledge, (critical reason), the self (critical self-reflection) and the world (critical action).

The capability for work is the actual freedom to choose the job that one values. This includes the freedom to choose not to work or to change jobs if one desires, as well as having the freedom to participate in determining ones' working conditions. The capability for work can be assessed in terms of material (income) and non-material (fulfilment, social belonging) wellbeing. The former limits personal agency to economic participation only while in the latter, it is widened to include individual or collective involvement in political and social areas.

Methodology

The research was based on multiple perspectives provided by different higher education stakeholders at the macro, meso and micro levels. The former comprised interviews with representatives from the national quality assurance agency; Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), while the meso level comprised interviews with university quality assurance representatives at 10 universities. The micro involved interviews with deans, lecturers and focus group discussions with final year students from a public and a private university. This enabled an examination of how national quality policy was being translated into practice.

Key findings

Quality is context specific and stakeholder dependent

Quality has a plurality of values which although important, are largely ignored in policy. There is a disjuncture between quality as policy and quality as practice. At the macro level, quality emphasises standardisation and benchmarking with a human capital emphasis, while at the meso and micro levels this broadens to incorporate other facets, albeit retaining the emphasis on human capital. Macro level perceptions of quality are mostly influenced by international and national concerns which, although found at the micro level, are tempered by considerations of specific institutional and individual contexts.

Education is not value free

Although contexts may vary, the Zimbabwean case provides an apt illustration of how quality can be used as a form of control. Similar to most countries, ideas of quality emphasise resources and standardisation, a technicist approach which narrowly confines universities to skill-based training, side-lining their public good role. Seemingly making T & L apolitical by foregrounding discipline specific knowledge, higher education becomes a political project aimed at producing technically proficient but unimaginative graduates. Despite a unanimous acknowledgement of criticality being central to university learning, education in this form reduces criticality to a value neutral skill that maintains rather than challenges the status quo, especially in developing countries.

A minimum resource threshold for capability enhancement

The case study also highlights the importance of basic resources such as accommodation, ICT systems, computers, books, lecture rooms and access to social services before one can expect higher education to enhance capabilities. In the absence of a minimum level of resources, especially in developing countries, it is difficult to focus on the intrinsic value of education. Hence the study's emphasis on human development incorporating economic growth.

Quality depends on freedom-based capabilities

Quality teaching and learning relies on the availability of freedom as both a means and an end to development. Freedom entails practices and

opportunities available to people within their context and can be explained by Sen's (1999) five instrumental freedoms. These include political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. In some developing countries, these freedoms are non-existent or limited, making for constraining factors of socio-political and economic environment (conversion factors) which limit universities' roles in fostering human development (Figure 1). Critical being and the capability for work are multi-level freedom-based capabilities which cannot be fully realised under constrained conditions. However, these capabilities are to be aspired for, as they are central to development and the creation of democratic citizens who value education for its material and non-material benefits.
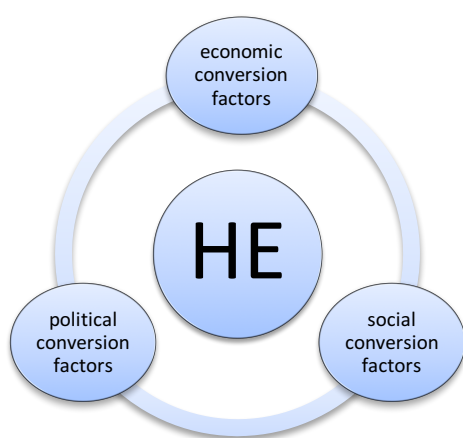

Figure 1: Conversion factors affecting universities

Recommendations

How can national and institutional quality assurance policies advance relevant and quality teaching and learning for human development purposes?

On the basis of the research findings, the brief recommends the following:

1. Instead of situating universities as training institutions, their public good role should also be foregrounded, mandating the nurturing of graduates able to engage with issues beyond the university and individual economic development.
2. Rather than nationally and institutionally conceptualising quality as a technical and managerial endeavour, it should be understood as a continuous process of improvement aimed at human development.
3. Given that quality is contextual, multi-faceted and stakeholder dependent, it's conceptualisation should include various stakeholder perspectives.
4. T & L should be foregrounded in conceptualising quality because it is the process through which students learn to know and to become.
5. Lecturers are critical to quality learning, making their continuous professional development, working conditions and remuneration important concerns.
6. Although quality is not synonymous with resources, a minimum resource threshold is necessary to support quality learning.
7. Ensure the use of student centred pedagogies which encourage their participation in learning and policy development.

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