SOME PRACTICAL ISSUES IN THE EVALUATION OF FOREIGN CERTIFICATES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Bolatumi **OYEGOKE**[1]; Buyisani **DUBE**[2]

[1,2]Faculty of Education, BA ISAGO University, Gaborone, Botswana.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

A B S T R A C T

The quality of the qualifications possessed by mobile students affects job opportunities and the eligibility for other higher qualifications in a country different from the issuing country. The processes involved in the evaluation run on some principles that are worthy of investigation because of the potential consequences which they can have on the aspirant student, institution and labour provider. This paper employed the qualitative method for its interrogation of the issues; hence data collection is through the desktop modality to source relevant information from, published academic journals, books and relevant guidelines. The discussion examined; the procedure for the evaluation of foreign certificates in South Africa and the different approaches to quality management systems in higher education that posed challenges to the evaluation of foreign qualifications. The paper recommends that quality assurance agencies may engage in networking with external agencies and programme experts to ensure appropriate standards are set for the review of qualifications across borders, such external involvement will provide the necessary information and manpower required for such exercise. Also, a constant monitoring and review of the processes and approaches to quality in higher education is of great importance. There is a need to set up mechanisms for the verification of qualifications by all institutions to eliminate falsification and purchase of issued certificates. And lastly, reviewers should maintain ownership of the report of an evaluation of foreign certificates.

1. Introduction

The recognition of foreign qualifications, institutional recognition, development of a credit transfer system, and national accreditation mechanisms for programmes and institutions, jointly aim at facilitating the global mobility of students and professionals to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. Today's world of economic globalization and increasingly networked society requires the need for evaluation for recognition of foreign qualifications outside of the issuing country. Globalization has been facilitated by recent advances in regional integration processes and trade agreements. These trade agreements have certainly led to an unprecedented level of mobility of labour from one region of the world to another and from some professions to others locally, regionally and internationally. The varied effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, wars, climate crises and natural disasters have left gaps in skilled labour in many countries. Therefore there is a skewed demand for professionals across the globe. Demand for skilled labour has greatly influenced the mobility of labour and increased mobility of students across the world. University World News (March 2023) reported that student mobility from the Sub-

Saharan region has increased by 21% from 2016 to 2021 and is likely to double by the year 2050. In much of the 20th century, the destination of outbound students was the developed countries like Australia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. In recent times, other countries such as China, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea and South Africa have emerged as increasingly popular destinations for international students. In sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa hosts the highest number of international students. Therefore, this paper considers some practical issues in the evaluation of Foreign Certificates in South Africa.

International organisations and the European Union, the African Union and the like now recognise that without a strong higher education system it is difficult (or maybe impossible) for any developing country, in Africa or elsewhere, to achieve sustainable development (World Bank, 2009). Higher education has always been the major source of skilled manpower that drives the development of any nation. A nation with a strong higher education system may progressively drive its socio-economic growth and develop the human capital resources required for development. The two concepts socio–economic growth and human capital development constitute major indices to the achievement of the sustainable development of a nation (World Bank, 2009). The connection between higher education and sustainable development makes it imperative for countries to give close attention to the quality of their higher education. However, over the past four decades, Sub-Saharan Africa has faced several challenges in the provision of higher education. The increased enrollment because of the high demand, and proliferation of higher education, coupled with shrinking public fund allocation to higher education systems cumulated to poor quality in the higher education system within the region (Southern Africa Research in University Association (SARUA, 2011). Also, different nations have different criteria for setting quality standards for quality assurance in Higher Education. Therefore, to regularize quality standards in Education, UNESCO has been advocating for regional and global conventions to set guidelines and standards for foreign credential evaluation (Ashizawa, 2023).

Studies by Weber and Popescu (2020), Lebeau, and Oanda, (2020) and Ramtohul, (2015) as well as other researchers confirmed that the highest percentage of outbound students occurs in Sub-Saharan Africa. Several factors such as the lack of adequate educational opportunities in the home countries, the quality of education, employment prospects, and the desire for qualifications with international recognition inform students' mobility from Sub-Saharan

Africa across the globe (SARUA, 2011). The appeal for better opportunities abroad also influences cross-border mobility. However, a good percentage (20%) of the Sub-Saharan mobile students chose to stay in the region. Most of those who stayed in the region are hosted in South Africa as mentioned earlier they are predominantly limited to graduates from Zimbabwe and other countries that are members of the Southern African Development Community, or SADC (University World News, March, 2023). This paper seeks to explore some issues faced in the reviewing of foreign qualifications in South Africa.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What is the procedure for the evaluation of foreign certificates in South Africa?
2. What are the different approaches to quality management systems in higher education that pose challenges to the evaluation of foreign qualifications?
3. What are the challenges faced by Quality Assurance Agencies in the Evaluation of Foreign Certificates?

3. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research method. Data was collected through desktop modality to source relevant information from secondary sources such as published journal articles, books, and international and national quality assurance guidelines. Data was analysed using themes, sub-themes and existing guidelines to explore current practices based on set criteria for developing the standards.

4. Literature Review

Recognition of foreign credentials is believed to be one of the most essential elements necessary to promote cross-border mobility for students and the provision of skilled professionals (Ashizawa, 2023). The recognition of foreign certificates is an arm of quality assurance in Higher Education. Defining quality assurance in higher education has attracted little or no consensus because of the nature of the concept of quality; quality is a dynamic, multidimensional, and perspective-driven concept. Scholars, researchers, academics, and quality management practitioners have used several descriptions for quality by way of attempting to define it (Mensah, 2020). Quality in higher education relates to the degree of excellence, conformance to requirements, totality of characteristics which act to satisfy a need, fitness for use, and fitness for purpose (Mensah, 2020). Many scholars seem to agree that quality

connotes ―fitness for purpose – meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007).

International student mobility has intensified because of regional integration processes which have an ever-increasing impact on the education systems. Several factors contribute to student mobility. Such factors include access to education, the quality of education, employment prospects and the desire for qualifications with worldwide recognition (SARUA, 2011). Other factors include educational opportunities in the home countries and the appeal of better opportunities abroad. The global student labour mobility led to the need for the evaluation of foreign qualifications (Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, 2016). The evaluation of foreign qualifications constitutes a central part of the whole process of recognition of foreign certificates for the purpose of student mobility and labour mobility. Evaluation leads to the recommendations which inform the process of acceptance and recognition. It follows that developing a credit transfer system and having a well-defined national, regional, and international accreditation mechanism, will facilitate the mobility of students and professionals globally (Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, 2016).

Recognition of foreign Certificates and accreditation of Higher Education requires Quality management (QM). Quality management involves overseeing all institutional activities and tasks needed to maintain a desired level of excellence in performance, leading to global acceptance (Jawad et al., 2015). Ensuring QM in HEIs calls for quality planning, quality control, quality assurance, and continuous quality improvement (Hassanien, 2017). The all-encompassing approach to making this happen is referred to as Total Quality Management (TQM). This approach involves all relevant stakeholders and processes in order to ensure effectiveness and success. TQM in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa will give the products (Holders of certificates from such institutions) competitive advantage in the global demand for professionals and skills in this Post COVID-19 era. The pandemic, climate crisis, war and natural disasters have introduced a great deal of uncertainty regarding the mobility of skilled talent and international students to global society (Ashizawa, 2023).

In the South African Development Countries (SADC) quality assurance in higher education requires that a qualification tendered for evaluation should have been registered in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of the awarding country. NQF is a comprehensive system approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training for the classification, registration,

publication and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications and part-qualifications of a particular nation. Such a qualification offered would be provided by an awarding institution that is accredited or recognised in a national system of another country and in accordance with the national policies, or the generally accepted practice of that country (SAQA, 2017).

The evaluation criteria can be formulated by a quality assurance agency, a government body, an expert group, or professional organisations, but they are sometimes formulated jointly by diverse stakeholders (ENQA, 2003). Accreditation of programmes is used on a regular basis by about half of the European quality assurance agencies. Accreditation procedures can also focus on Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs); for instance, one of the tasks of the German Akkreditierungsrat is to accredit other agencies (ENQA, 2003). US accrediting organisations also undergo a periodic external review based on specific standards; this process is known as 'recognition' (Eaton, 2004). Eaton further explained that in the US, standards for recognition of accrediting organisations (i.e., standards for accreditation of agencies) are defined by the recognizing institutions (ENQA, 2003). In South Africa, the process for evaluation of foreign qualifications involves the verification and comparison of qualifications to determine the authenticity of the qualification as well as locate the foreign qualification within the South Africa National Qualification Framework (NQF) (SAQA, 2017).

Institutions develop a set of standards and demonstrate their quality against the predetermined set of standards. There is the understanding that different institutions and other stakeholders have different approaches to defining quality, hence it becomes difficult to conceptualize quality from any one perspective (Mensah, 2020). It presupposes that any definition of quality must be placed in the context in which it was used. An institution may be of high quality with respect to one factor or with respect to the opinion of certain stakeholders but perceived to be of low quality in other areas by other stakeholders. As a result, Komotar (2020) identified the following five approaches to quality in the field of higher education. Such approaches include the exceptional or highest standards, transformational, conformity to standards, fitness for purpose, and competence-based standards of professional bodies. Each of these approaches is discussed below:

4.1 The exceptional or highest standards

Some institutions set standards to be one of the best higher education providers in the world, for example, the University of Ljubljana, the oldest and the highly ranked Slovenian university

defines its standard as being one of the first 250 universities in the world. Also, the University of Nova Gorica in the same country in 2016, claims to find itself among the world's elite in terms of quality. Such standard goals will be dependent on the capacity of the individual countries in which the universities are resident and the capacity of higher education (Hazelkorn, 2012). But as Astin (1982) acknowledged, an exceptional higher education institution is one that has the ability "to affect its students favourably, to enhance their intellectual development, and to make a positive difference in their lives". Based on this Astin's view of the conception of quality as transformational, Komotar (2020), Harvey and Green, (1993) acknowledge that the enhancement of students' knowledge, skills and other abilities results from their educational experience (Harvey, 2004) and not from the "top" institutional position. Hence the move towards competency-based standards for professional bodies' accreditation; the transformational thus formed another approach to quality assurance.

4.2 Conformity to standards

An approach to quality assurance also involves compliance with predefined standards for accreditation. This process may lower the efficiency and innovation of higher education institutions which operate in an environment of increasing institutional and programme diversity (Mensah, 2020) But still, accreditation practices may vary considerably from one country to another and even standard terms may have distinct meanings (Hämäläinen, Pehu-Voima, and Wahlen, 2001).

4.3 The fitness for purpose

The fitness for purpose approach considers the stated purpose of a higher education institution or a programme (mission statement). The approach also questions whether or not this purpose is an acceptable purpose of higher education (fitness of purpose). This approach has been faced with the argument that institutions and programmes cannot all be judged against the same standards since they may serve specific clientele and service groups in a diversified system of higher education (Martins & Stella, 2007). Fitness for purpose, though the most widely accepted definition of quality (Harvey and Green, 1993) puts emphasis on the achievement of minimum standards and the use of numerical indicators which are often determined by external stakeholders Westerheijden and Sorenson, 1999). Nevertheless, the fitness for purpose approach requires some measure of fitness of purpose that is, the recognition that not every purpose is acceptable, but that the purpose has to be set within what is understood as being at the higher education level (Martins & Stella, 2007).

4.4 Standards-based

In the standards-based quality for professional bodies, institutions demonstrate their quality

against a set of predetermined standards. Compliance with norms, accountability, rules and regulations and adopting codes of practice are predominant (Woodhouse, 1999). Therefore, professional bodies define quality for licensing new entrants by setting standards based on the expected outcomes and competencies. There are several ways by which professional bodies develop their competence-based goals; for example, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants has competency-based standards for the registration of its qualifications by identifying two types of competencies, such as pervasive qualities, skills, and specific competencies for specific professions. Such competency-based standards were developed to meet the professional needs within the Canadian context. However, Singh and Duvekot (2013) defined effective national qualifications frameworks to meet the following requirements: i) Develop individual competence portfolios, effective in different settings or contexts; ii) Link competence requirements and learning needs to tailor-made education (non-formal) offers; iii) Link competence requirements in work and voluntary organisations to the content of further education and training.

5   Discussion

Evaluation is a process of analysing foreign qualifications in terms of their home contexts and points of difference and/or similarities in relation to local qualifications and context. Evaluation leads to recommendations which inform the process of acceptance and recognition body (SAQA, 2017). The Evaluation of foreign qualifications involves the following processes:

5.1 Establish Legitimacy of the qualification

South Africa complies with the global recognition of foreign qualifications; the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (SAQA, 2017). Globally the recognition of foreign qualifications is guided by several legal instruments often led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). To establish the legitimacy of any academic qualification, these international legal instruments must be complied with (SAQA, 2017).

i.   The authenticity of the qualification will be established if, at the time of enrolment of the qualification holder, the following conditions were met. These include.

ii.   Accreditation of the institution in accordance with the national policy on accreditation

iii.   The qualification was part of a formal education and training system in the country of origin.

iv.   The institution was authorized to offer the qualification.

v.   The qualification holder has successfully completed all the requirements for the award of the qualification as confirmed by the awarding body (SAQA, 2017).

One of the most important aspects in the establishment of the authentication of a foreign certificate is the accreditation of the awarding institution and the accreditation of the programme by the awarding institution. The challenge to the evaluation of foreign certificates may arise because of the different criteria for setting standards across nations and even across institutions within a nation.

5.2. Comparison of the Foreign Qualification

Upon completion of the authentication process, the qualification moves to the comparison stage. The NQF of the programme for which the qualification was issued will be compared with the NQF of a relevant programme in the nation in which the certificate is being evaluated. The level descriptors of the NQF as well as the structure of the programme will also be compared. Other policies such as policy for credit accumulation and transfer within the NQF are also considered. The exit and learning outcome of the programme will also be useful to establish the competencies expected of the holder of the qualifications. The evaluation decision will therefore be based on learning outcomes, based on both level descriptors and qualification descriptors (SAQA, 2017). The comparison stage conforms with the standard approach to Standard approach to quality in higher education. It involves compliance with norms, accountability, rules, and regulations and adopting codes of practice as earlier mentioned. Such standards are set based on the expected outcomes and competencies expected of the holders of such certificates.

5.3. Accreditation and Evaluation of Foreign Qualifications

Based on the processes for the evaluation of foreign qualifications, as explained above, it is evident that the accreditation status of the awarding institution and the accreditation status of the programme offered by the foreign student are very important aspects of the evaluation of the qualification. Accreditation is an evaluation (evaluation involves assessments and audit) of whether an institution or programme meets a threshold standard and qualifies for a certain status. Accreditation is a widely used method in quality assurance in (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. For example, in the United States accreditation of both programmes and institutions is the main quality assurance method (Eaton, 2004).

However, institutions adopt different approaches to develop criteria for standards for quality assurance. The lack of uniformity of the approaches makes it difficult to evaluate the

qualification. Therefore, different standards constitute challenges to the evaluation of external qualifications. Some of the challenges are discussed below.

6 Challenges Faced by External Quality Assurance Agency during Evaluation of Foreign Qualifications.

External Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAA) encounter certain challenges in the process of evaluating a foreign certificate. Some of such challenges are discussed below.

Conformity to standards: Sengupta, Blessinger, & Makhanya, (2020) opined that conformity to standards may lower the efficiency and innovation of higher education institutions. They further explained that most Sub-Saharan countries experience ever-increasing institutional and programme diversity Hence, accreditation practices vary considerably from one country to another therefore there is a need for evaluation of qualifications across borders for recognition.

Capacity of the country and institutional capacity: Another challenge is that the capacity of the individual country in which the higher institution is resident, and the capacity of the individual institution influence the approach to quality with regards to the exceptional or highest standard approach. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the capacity of individual countries with regard to the education systems. Also, the capacity of the higher institutions within nations varies from one institution to another. Therefore, there is a need for the evaluation of foreign certificates for recognition and the assurance of the quality of the education system.

Institutional quality goals: Institutional quality goals may also constitute a challenge to the evaluation of foreign certificates. The transformational approach to quality standards in higher education focuses on the ability of an institution to affect its students favourably, enhance their intellectual development, and make a positive difference in their lives. To achieve these fits institutions will set competency-based standards that address the improvement of knowledge, skills and other abilities by their educational experience. This again depends on the quality goal of the individual institution. Practical education discourses reveal that different nations and different institutions are at different levels of this practice, hence the challenge of evaluation.

The fitness for purpose approach: The fitness for purpose approach is one approach that clearly shows that institutions and programmes cannot all be judged against the same standards since they may serve specific purposes and serve different groups in a diversified system of higher education. This also poses a challenge to the evaluation of the foreign certificate; therefore, the

evaluation of the foreign certificate is challenged by the different purposes for which institutions are established and what exactly constitutes minimum standards by various institutions and various groups.

The standards-based approach: The standards-based approach to quality in education quality focuses on professional bodies. Institutions demonstrate their quality against a set of predetermined standards. Compliance with norms, accountability, rules and regulations and adopting codes of practice which are different for different nations across the region. Standards are also set based on the expected outcomes and competencies. This approach also emphasizes different contexts, settings and different purposes which constitute a huge challenge to evaluation of qualifications in Sub-Saharan Africa based on the diversity of the region. Production of false documents: several publications have shown that some degrees were purchased with money and not earned by the holders of such degrees (Plessis, Vermeulen, Walt & Maekela, 2015). Difficulties in receiving feedback for clarification of certificates are also a challenge. Also, the credibility of the report will depend on the integrity of the reviewer. If the reviewers are corrupt, it will lead to not going through the process but the presentation of a false positive report as a result of bribery.

7   Conclusion

As a result of the variable demand for the skilled labour market, the evaluation of foreign qualifications becomes a requirement for the mobility of students and labour across the world. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of outbound students. Several factors, such as the inability of the home country to provide quality education, and the quest for internationally recognised qualifications and employment are some of the reasons for student mobility. While many of the students chose to study in developed countries, some others chose South Africa as their destination. The South African processes for evaluation of foreign qualifications require the accreditation of the institution from which the qualification was provided as well as the programme accreditation. Institutions adopt different approaches to develop criteria for standards for quality assurance in higher education. The different purposes and approaches to quality make it difficult to evaluate foreign qualifications. Other challenges that affect the evaluation of qualifications include the integrity of the reviewers as well as that of the holders of the qualifications.

The process of evaluation of foreign qualification in South Africa requires that the

qualifications tendered for evaluation to i) have been registered in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of the awarding country, ii) verify the qualification to determine the authenticity of the qualification and iii) the need to locate the foreign qualification within the South Africa National Qualification Framework (NQF) by way of comparison. This is done to establish the competencies obtained by possessing the qualification. The process is similar to the standard-based approach to quality which emphasizes different contexts, settings and different purposes for setting. Different institutions have different purposes for setting standards for quality. Therefore the different contexts, settings and purposes should be considered in the evaluation of the qualifications; failure to do so by the quality assurance processes might come across as victimization to some holders of the migrant certificates.

8   Conclusion

The findings revealed that most teachers in secondary schools do not attend conferences, seminars, workshops, and other research-related activities, especially in rural schools. They do not also have access to the research findings from conferences organized. The problems of application of research findings in classroom practices are due to, no training in research activities, no remuneration for additional qualification, no motivation from authorities and Government, no internet facilities, and no sponsorship for attendance. Research is a vital tool in sustainable development. Research findings are indispensable tools for improving teaching teaching-learning process in classroom practice. To sustain development, there is a need to make research attendance compulsory once a term or year to make access for teachers to research findings and improve their classroom practices. Results revealed the non-involvement of most secondary school teachers in in-service training programmes. Also, there are no Internet facilities for teachers in rural areas to access research information.

9   Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations were made:

1. Quality assurance agencies may engage in networking with a group of institutions within a nation and international agencies on a comparative basis to provide criteria for setting standards on the accreditation and the review process across borders especially in the current phase of globalization and internationalization of the higher education system. Networking of reviews across borders will assist with providing necessary information to address the different contexts, settings, and different purposes for the accreditation of programmes and institutions.

2. Another control may be a constant review of the processes and approaches to quality assurance in line with the current trends in the higher education systems. For example, there is a need to set standards for distance and e-learning platforms to ensure quality in higher education systems.

3. Institutions that do not yet provide a platform for verification of their qualifications should set up mechanisms for the verification of qualifications awarded by such institutions to ease the exercise and eliminate the purchase of certificates. This occurs because perpetrators of such acts operate on the premise that verification of certificates is made difficult by even some very old reputable institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

4. The integrity of the reviewing agency and the panels is of great importance to enhance the credibility of the decision made by the reviewers. Therefore in the election of the EQA and the review panel, integrity and accountability of the panel must be carefully considered.

5. Another very important control is maintaining the ownership of the accreditation certificate by the QAA. This is important because it implies that the certificate can be withdrawn if there is any evidence of fraudulence in the information provided by the holder of the certificate during the review process. The agency is not liable in case of any legal action taken by the holder of the qualification.

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