

Analysis of the peer-reviewed process used in the accreditation of new programmes in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of accreditation is to assist higher education institutions to improve the quality of higher education delivery. Most quality assurance bodies use the accreditation model that is founded on the principles of self-regulation and peer review. However, the use of peer reviewers in accreditation has been criticised because of the time taken, the expense and the possibility of peer reviewer bias. Notwithstanding these criticisms, no effective alternatives have been proffered and hence it is prudent to improve on the existing model. The objective of the study was to assess the peer review process used in accreditation of new programmes in Zimbabwe with a view of improving the credibility of the process. The methodology entailed a qualitative research design premised on documentary analysis, questionnaires and interviews with academic community and staff from the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education. The results showed that although it has its flaws, the peer-reviewed accreditation model is largely accepted by the academic community. The issues of concern pertained to peer reviewers, ZIMCHE and the higher education institutions. However, these issues are not insurmountable; they can be addressed by paying attention to peer reviewer selection and training as well as making sure that ZIMCHE increases its capacity in terms of human and financial resources. In order to further strengthen the peer-reviewed accreditation process, ZIMCHE should consider discussing with the institutions and agreeing with them on the choice of peer reviewers to be used before they are assigned tasks.

Keywords: Accreditation, peer review, quality assurance, higher education, reviewer bias

1. Introduction

Accreditation is the key mechanism that is used by quality assurance bodies to promote, assure and improve the quality of higher education provision (de Guzman, 2003; Espionza &

González, 2013; Gandhi, 2013; Harvey, 1998; Hayward, 2006; Kristoffersen, Surssock, & Westerheijden, 1998; Middlehurst & Woodhouse, 1995; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Accreditation refers to a process or a status wherein either an institution or a programme is accredited, or it is not (Campbell et al., 2000; Haakstad, 2001). As a status, accreditation provides the information on the legitimacy, recognition and guarantee pertaining to the extent to which an institution or a programme has achieved or exceeded the minimum agreed standards (Ching, 2013; Wolf & Goodwin, 2007). As a process, accreditation reflects the commitment of the institution or programme to continuous quality improvement through self-assessment and peer review. The decisions on accreditation should be premised on a transparent process of assessment according to agreed standards (Benson, 2003; Batool & Qureshi, 2006; ElKhawas, 1998). However, because accreditation is founded on the principles of self-regulation and peer review (Bertkau, Halpern, Yadla, 2005), not all accreditation decisions are considered to be credible. The study was therefore aimed at assessing the peer-reviewed accreditation process used by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education in the accreditation of new programmes.

1.1 The of peer review concept

Peer review refers to the practice of utilising the expertise and experience of third parties in appraising the academic soundness, performance, creativity, or quality of programmes submitted for accreditation (Smith, 2006). Third parties here refer to colleagues or peers in a specific area of competence which lies within a similar domain. Eisenhart (2002) argues that colleagues from the same domain are best placed to assess the extent to which the programme or institution under assessment meets the quality standards. Peer review teams are thus comprised of practitioners who are experts in specific subject areas and field of practice. Peer reviewers must adhere to agreed and well documented standards, policies and procedures for assessing quality. The identities of the peer reviewers and the host institution for the programme or institution to be accredited may remain anonymous or they may be open. Whatever the case, the peer review process should foster objectivity and fairness in accordance to the agreed norms and standards and should be done by people who are not affiliated or conflicted with the reviewing entity or reviewed institution (Tyler, 2006).

Peer review is considered to be a critical component of accreditation that is focused on ensuring fairness and objectivity through a well-organised system of checks and balances in the pursuit of quality improvement in higher education (Cross & Naidoo, 2011; Harnad, 2000; Lee, 2013; Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). Proponents of the peer review system consider it to be the most effective instrument for improving the standards of higher education delivery through applying the tenet self-regulation and mutual control involving the separation of responsibilities and powers (Daniel, 2007; Polanyi, 1966). Peer review is an interactive process that is designed to embody acceptance, endorsement and respect by colleagues who provide constructive criticism, necessary for quality improvement (Burnham, 1990; Cole, 2003; Head & Johnson, 2011; Kumrow & Dahlen, 2002; Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). However, many people world-over, have criticised the peer review-based accreditation on the pretext that it leads to delays in the accreditation process, is expensive and is often biased (Eaton, Fryshman, Hope, Scanlon & Crow, 2005; Padro, 2010). Notwithstanding these criticisms, no

effective alternatives have been proffered; hence it is prudent for quality assurance bodies to ensure that the peer review system is improved by taking into account the stakeholder concerns (Bornmann, Mittag & Daniel, 2006; Geisler, 2001; Godlee & Dickersin, 2003).

It is important to note that the peer review method is not limited to accreditation processes; it is also applicable to all fields. For example scholarly journals use it to assess the rigor, accuracy, importance and utility of manuscripts presented for publication; universities use peer review for assessing suitability for tenure, promotion, awards/honours, and research funding whilst other organisations use it to evaluate candidate for membership into prestigious societies (Lawrence et al., 2011; Mignon & Langsam, 1999; Parsons, Duerr, & Minster, 2010; Swiskes, 1999). Whilst all these perspectives of peer review exist, the focus of this study is on peer-reviewed accreditation.

1.2 Objectives of the study

Although most national quality assurance bodies use similar input, process and outcome criteria for accreditation (Aelterman, 2006; Shabani, Okebukola & Oyewole, 2014; Stensaker & Harvey, 2006), the details of the processes differ markedly (Brennan & Shah, 2000). In all cases peer reviewers are used for assessment. This study aims to assess the peer reviewed accreditation process used by ZIMCHE to approve new programmes in Zimbabwe. Three research questions were formulated as follows:

1.2.1 What is the step-by-step peer-reviewed accreditation process

1.2.2 What are the opinions of the academic community on the accreditation process

1.2.3 What are the perceptions of peer reviewers concerning the accreditation process

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design and an explanatory approach to data interpretation. The researcher conducted the study from March to May 2015. The research instruments included documentary analysis, interviews and questionnaires. Information on the first research question was collected through analysis of ZIMCHE documents and accreditation instruments as well as face to face interviews with key informants from ZIMCHE. Data pertaining to the second and third research questions was collected using questionnaires given to top university management, academics and peer reviewers. The interviews included 6 key informants from ZIMCHE staff members. A semi-structured interview guide that was designed in such a way as to allow participants the liberty to express their opinions as described by Flick (2006) was used. The interview guide collected information on the details of the accreditation process and the opinions of key informants on the usefulness of peer reviewers' recommendations as well as their perceptions on the effectiveness of the process.

The target population of approved peer reviewers was 368; from these random sampling stratified by institution and area of specialisation was used to select 50 peer reviewers. Two

members of the university top management from each of the nine state and six private universities were selected on the basis of the office they represent in such a way that in the total sample of 30 respondents there were five participants representing the following principal officers: Vice Chancellor, Pro-Vice Chancellor Academic, Registrar, Librarian, ICT Director and Finance Director. In addition, for every university, all Deans from those faculties that had applied to introduce new programmes in 2014 were targeted. Consequently, questionnaires were sent to 50 peer reviewers, 30 members of the top university management and 35 Deans of Faculties. Two questionnaires were designed one for the university management and academics and a separate one for the peer reviewers. Both questionnaires obtained information on respondents' perceptions concerning the accreditation process as well as the involvement of peer reviewers in accreditation. The questionnaires were structured in such a way that the questions initially required yes or no answers and then gave space for the respondents to explain the reasons for their responses.

3. Results and discussion

The findings are presented and discussed according to the three research questions

3.1 The ZIMCHE peer-review accreditation process

The Zimbabwean context regarding accreditation epitomises other African countries. The government of Zimbabwe established the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), in 2006 to promote, regulate and assure quality (Garwe, 2014). Similar to what was reported by Cross & Naidoo (2011), before an institution or programme is accredited; ZIMCHE has to ascertain that it meets the minimum agreed standards as detailed in the programme accreditation instrument.

The accreditation procedure involves a total of five stages. It starts with the institution submitting an application for accreditation and approval to introduce a new programme to ZIMCHE. The application is supported by programme regulations, evidence of needs analysis from stakeholder consultations, detailed explanation of how the new programme fits into the university mandate as well as minutes indicating approval by the university Senate. After ZIMCHE satisfies itself that the basic requirements are met, the package is sent to at least three reviewers who are experts in that discipline or are currently running similar programmes. The reviewers are given a specified time period (usually three weeks) to make their input after which ZIMCHE consolidates the suggestions into one report. The report is sent to the applicant (institution) to allow them to provide a response on each and every suggestion proffered. The institution is free to accept the changes or to provide a convincing account of the reasons why it is not taking up some of the suggestions. This is the point where delays take place since some institutions take a long time to respond but end up blaming ZIMCHE for the delay. For those institutions without an internal quality assurance unit, documents at times get lost.

Stage 2 starts with ZIMCHE inviting the institution to submit a self-evaluation report according to the criteria contained in the accreditation instrument provided by ZIMCHE. The criteria include: governance and administrative structure, policies and procedures;

infrastructure; equipment; ICT facilities; library space, print and e-resources; internal quality assurance systems; curriculum; staff levels and qualifications; enrolment statistics; funding levels; instructional and student support systems.

Stage 3 involves a site visit by a team of assessors comprising of ZIMCHE officials and peer reviewers. The visit is only undertaken when the institutions has paid accreditation fees. The team conducts interviews with administrative staff, academic leadership (Dean, Chairperson and Programme Coordinator) lecturers and students. The team then evaluates and rate the institution's provisions for offering programmes against the self-evaluation rating, the interviews and the physical checks. The peer reviewers will then present the highlights of the preliminary findings and recommendations to the management of the institution before preparing a formal report. At this stage the institution is alerted of any information or documentation that is outstanding. Formal communication to the institution will then follow and they are given time to comment and implement peer reviewers' recommendations.

Stage 4 entails discussion of the report by members of the Higher Education and Quality Assurance Committee (HEQAC) of Council who then present their recommendations to full Council. If HEQAC is not satisfied, the institution is again called upon to provide more information or effect the required changes. The major area of concern is usually to do with adequacy, appropriateness and levels of qualifications of teaching staff. Council will then make a decision to accredit or not to accredit the institution or programme. The last stage involves the Head of the Secretariat communicating the decision to the institution concerned as well as publicising it in the press. In case of programmes that fail to be accredited the process will start again as and when the institution addresses the areas of concern or when the programme has to be re-accredited. This process is also carried out for all new programmes that have to obtain accreditation and approval by ZIMCHE before they are introduced. The key informants from ZIMCHE conceded that because some programmes fail to be accredited or approved, concerns have been raised regarding the credibility of such decisions citing lack of knowledge and objectivity by the peer reviewers.

When questioned about ZIMCHE's take on the allegation, respondents explained that the use of peer reviewers in accreditation is premised on the understanding that peers in higher education have the relevant experience and that guided by the agreed benchmarks; they are in a position to make informed judgments to assure and promote quality. ZIMCHE uses the term peer to depict a specialist or an expert in a certain area. The number of the review reviewers that are assigned to a programme ranges from three to five with some taking care of the programme regulations and some dealing with the site visit, in a few instances, it is possible for one reviewer to be engaged in both tasks. Peer reviewers are drawn from academia, student bodies, graduates, alumni, industry and from professional associations. ZIMCHE maintains a database of approved and trained peer reviewers from which they select those required for a specific assessment. For one to qualify to be a reviewer they must satisfy that they have the appropriate academic credentials, have scientific or professional reputation, have knowledge and experience in designing programmes and university teaching. In addition, they must be impartial and they should have the right attitudes. The specific requirements are outlined below:

- Nominated or referred by the institution through the Head of Faculty or institution
- Be a holder of at least a Master's degree in the appropriate discipline from a reputable and accredited institution
- Has published at least eight peer reviewed articles
- Has ten years of experience in university teaching or in the relevant professional practice
- Approved by the ZIMCHE Higher Education Quality Assurance Committee

In cases where appropriate reviewers are not available from the database, ZIMCHE requests Vice Chancellors, Deans of Faculties, professional bodies or other sister quality assurance agencies based in other countries to assist in identifying relevant peer reviewers. Training of peer reviewers enables them to understand ZIMCHE's expectations, assessment criteria and assists in minimising inter-panel variance.

It should be noted that unlike in other peer-reviewed accreditation processes where the institution applying to offer a new programme has a right to propose or to reject certain peer reviewers as in the case of Germany (Kehm, 2006), the ZIMCHE procedures do not currently have this leeway. Whilst ZIMCHE acknowledges the existence of unavoidable peer review biases inherent in certain disciplines, institutions or affiliations, they still believed that the peer review system is useful. ZIMCHE continuously trains and enriches its database of peer reviewers so that as recommended by Greene (2011), only those peer reviewers with the right qualifications, experience, exposure and attitudes are used. This agrees with the findings from other studies that the strength of the collegial peer review model is derived from the fact that academics ought to have more influence in taking care of their own practice (Boone, 2007; Chase 1997; Harrington-Lueker 1997; Vedung, 2003).

3.2 Perceptions of top university managers and academic leaders

The perceptions of the respondents on the accreditation process is shown in Table 1

Table 1. Perceptions of university managers and Deans on the accreditation process

Question	Response	
	Yes (%)	No (%)
Is accreditation useful	91	9
Is the accreditation process effective	67	33
Does accreditation lead to quality improvement	76	24
Is the effort worth the results	88	12

Did you get any personal benefit	39	61
Overall satisfaction with the process	68	32

Table 1 shows that of the respondents perceive that accreditation is a useful (91%), worthwhile process (88%) that is effective (67%) and leads to quality improvement (76%). They commended that they believed that the process was good because the universities are given time to implement reviewer suggestions. Those that were not satisfied with the process gave reasons that are illustrated in Figure 1.

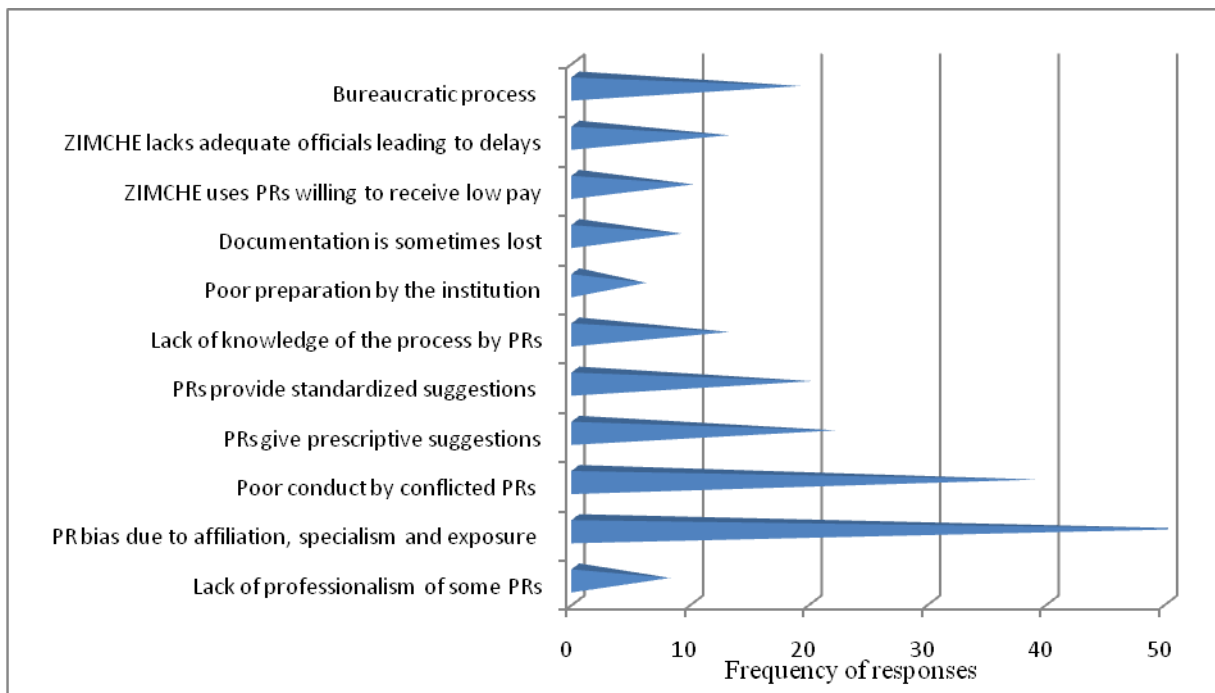


Figure 1. Reasons for lack of satisfaction with the accreditation process

It can be seen from Figure 1 that most of the criticisms (55%) for the process were levelled against the peer reviewers. Reviewers were regarded as biased, unprofessional, lacking knowledge of the process and they tended to give standardized and prescriptive suggestions. Even when assessing similar programmes, Stufflebeam (2000) emphasises the need to consider the context for each programme. This is very relevant for Zimbabwe since each institution of higher learning has its own unique mandate. ZIMCHE-centred criticisms (27%) were related to the shortage of a critical mass of staff members thus leading to delays in the accreditation process. The process was also criticised as being bureaucratic since the final decisions were only made after approval by Council members. The honorarium given by ZIMCHE to peer reviewers was considered too little to attract well-respected professionals. The institutions of higher learning received 23% of the blame since at times documents from ZIMCHE were lost by some officials and the poor preparation by some departments that led to accreditation problems.

3.3 Perceptions of top peer reviewers

The perceptions of the respondents on the accreditation process are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Perceptions of peer reviewers on the accreditation process

Question	Response	
	Yes (%)	No (%)
Peer review work is interesting and challenging	100	0
Peer reviewers are given prior orientation	61	39
Information is adequate to carry out assessments	77	23
Accreditation instruments are clear and easy to use	89	11
I make objective judgments and recommendations	100	0
Honorarium is adequate	49	51
The process is contextual and dynamic	97	3

Table 2 shows that most reviewers found the accreditation process to be challenging (100%), dynamic (97%) and that the information (77%) and instruments (89%) were adequate and appropriate. All the peer reviewers believed that they were objective and unbiased in their recommendations. In fact some actually agreed that they had found new things that they had gone on to implement in their areas of work. Only 61% agreed that they had been given adequate prior orientation, the others reported that they had just received a brief outline of the work just before they were thrown into the deep end. Regarding the honorarium although 51% viewed it to be inadequate, they explained that they were not only motivated by monetary awards, they also enjoyed the exposure and recognition to the extent that they were even prepared to do it for free.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The results showed that although it has its flaws, the peer-reviewed accreditation model is largely accepted by the academic community. The issues of concern pertained to peer reviewers, ZIMCHE and the higher education institutions. However, these issues are not insurmountable; they can be addressed by paying attention to peer reviewer selection and training as well as making sure that ZIMCHE increases its capacity in terms of human and financial resources. The process relies on peer reviewers' evaluations, judgments and suggestions necessary to improve quality. The process has adequate checks and balances and responsibilities involving the higher education institution, peer reviewers and ZIMCHE

which improve the objectivity of decisions. The checks and balances attempt to reduce conflicts of interest by peer reviewers. In addition, the selection of experienced and professional peer reviewers who are not affiliated to the programme under review and the involvement of ZIMCHE Council members aids in improving the credibility of accreditation decisions. In order to further strengthen the peer-reviewed accreditation process, ZIMCHE should consider discussing with the institutions and agreeing with them on the choice of peer reviewers to be used before they are assigned tasks.

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