

# Quality Management of the Postgraduate Programs in the Faculty of Management Studies at Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) – A Case Study

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## Abstract

Demeke Yeneayhu, in Peter Materu (2007) argues that “One of the major problems of African education is not as most think – universally; it is quality which is the problem. Africa needs thinkers, scientists and researchers, real educators who can potentially contribute to societal development. Most donors define African education success in terms of how many students are being graduated and how many students are in school. The quantity issue is of course one thing that should be addressed, but it shouldn’t be the whole mark of any education intervention in Africa. How an African resource could be better utilized by an African child for an African development should be the issue.” This case study shows how multifaceted improving quality can be in institutions of higher learning, with particular emphasis to Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU). The whole process of improving quality has to adopt many trigger areas that are aimed to result into quality improvement of postgraduate programs. If only one aspect is addressed, the final product cannot have the desired expectations.

**Key words:** Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), quality management

## Introduction

The DIES Project on regional quality assurance in higher education was initiated together with the Inter- University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) at the beginning of 2006 in cooperation with the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) and the University of Oldenburg. The initial talks with the IUCEA were held during a DIES

information visit to Germany by East African rectors and vice-rectors. In mid June 2006, the first workshop was held on the introduction of quality assurance in Nairobi with about thirty participants from East Africa. The end of 2006 saw a number of national workshops held in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda with around fifteen participants each in order to plan for further cooperation and to develop a self-evaluation guide for universities (Mayunga, Bienefeld, Hansert 2009). This new perception of higher education was then to be engineered by the deans and heads of departments in universities. As dean of a faculty, the quality assurance drive triggered a keen thinking of coming up with a project to improve quality in programs. The IDC provided the platform of starting a project and implement it in the faculty.

It is against this background that a new thinking to what holders of postgraduate diplomas in public administration, human resources management, and in project planning and management, or holders of master's of public administration or business administration should be able to demonstrate. It was recognized that students were spending a long time on postgraduate studies, others were dropping off and the majority could not exhibit any sign of what is expected of a postgraduate student. Crucial to this background, it was evident that there is a need for improving both the quality and completion rates of postgraduate programs.

## **Background to the Problem**

The year 2006 saw a new phase, in which universities started to think critically about the products they produce in East Africa through a systematically planned procedure. This was a result of a number of national workshops held in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda with around fifteen participants each in order to plan the further cooperation and to develop a self-evaluation guide for universities. The primary destination for the quality assurance efforts was then directed to the deans and heads of departments to start thinking of quality of their programs. Deans were required to think critically about the inputs, processes, outputs, completion rates, dropout rates, students' employability, stakeholder involvement in curriculum development and review and many other quality assurance attributes. Although the practice of quality assurance could be traced in the faculty and the university at large, a systematic track record of all those mentioned above could not be clearly established. This triggered the need to pursue activities that would address these shortfalls, particularly the quality and completion rates of postgraduate programs in the faculty of management studies.

In the process of compiling dropout rates, it was discovered that many students either drop out or take too long to complete their respective programs. Between

2003 and 2007, over ninety students had not completed their Master of Business Administration or Master of Public Administration, the majority of whom had absconded and were discontinued (Center for Postgraduate Studies minutes 2008). It is against this background that during the IDC program skills for developing Project Action Plans became vital and lead to the development and implementation of this plan of improving quality and completion rates of postgraduate programs.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study adopted two specific objectives:

- To develop mechanisms that will enhance the process of completion rates of postgraduate programs at Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU).
- To develop ways that will ensure quality of postgraduate programs at IUIU.

## **Methodology and Procedure**

The methodology used was predominantly questionnaires and interviews. In the initial stages, there was a lot of building consensus from various stakeholders for the need to improve both the completion rates and quality of the programs.

Various meetings were held across the university. The faculty intended to solicit support and build consensus on the way forward. These meetings included:

- Meeting the Vice Rector (Academic Affairs).
- Center for Postgraduate Studies where all postgraduate students are housed.
- Faculty members through the faculty board.
- Heads of departments.
- Librarian as it involves changing reading materials for the students.
- Student representatives.

These meetings ensured that findings and recommendations would have the mandate of all stakeholders. Then, between 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> October 2009, a draft report was presented at the regional conference in Nairobi/Kenya to generate more ideas.

## **How is Quality Managed for the Postgraduate Programs at the Faculty**

The handbook “A Road map to Quality” (volume 1), which has been jointly developed in the initiative of IUCEA and DAAD, suggests that quality runs from the inputs, process and output. As such it was perceived that to improve quality of the postgraduate programs, a combination of many factors need to be highlighted in

order to guarantee this needed shift. The following actions were agreed upon to improve the quality of the programs and student completion rates.

## **Admission Requirements**

**Input** – The admission requirements have been a bachelor’s degree, lower second, upper second and first class in any field. This has, however, proved a problem to those with no business background since many courses would require a certain level of experience. The new admission requirements will have a requirement of business or public administration knowledge to be admitted to the master’s program. In a case where one does not possess this qualification, he/she is required to start with a postgraduate diploma in either business administration or public administration. It is hoped that this would ensure that all those admitted have knowledge enough to master in business or public administration. This caters for the input level.

## **Admitted Number of Students**

**Input** – These programs are seen as money generating for the faculties and so numbers are always welcome at the expense of quality. Previously, each of the two master’s programs would attract forty-five to fifty students each year. It is equally known by universities and regulatory agencies in Uganda and East Africa that getting the right number of professors or PhD holders in the field of business in the region is not easy. To effectively supervise these numbers cannot be possible, a possible explanation to the delayed completion because the existing professors would be overloaded. It is now agreed in IUIU that the maximum number to be admitted for either degree will be thirty students, and each professor will be allowed a maximum of five students to supervise. The belief by the IUIU Research Committee is that these will be adequately taken care of to ensure that many complete and also that the student teacher ratio is acceptable.

## **Teaching Staff**

**Input** – Deliberate attempt to attract high quality staff to the faculty through offering incentives that attracts the best instructors. This is done through staff development of the existing lecturers to advance to higher levels, short courses to improve their teaching abilities and attracting those from outside the university.

## Teaching Process

**Process** – This is the complete shift from the traditional teaching methods, i. e., black board and reading notes, therefore teacher centered. In this method, the teacher is all-knowing and the students look to him/her to unleash knowledge for them to consume. This was done without considering that some of these students have already attained enough working experience and that sharing of knowledge would have therefore worked magic. The teaching procedure henceforth will be using cases, seminars, placements, discussions, field trips, visiting lecturers and discussions provided by renowned businessmen within the business environment. These will give a better hands-on learning experience to improve on the quality of the graduates of the faculty.

## Establishment of the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee

**Process** – All vetting activities and guidance of the students should be in the hands of a team of experienced lecturers for better results. This committee is charged with two major activities:

- Convene graduate seminars for the students at the stage when students develop their research topics before being allocated supervisors.
- Conduct mini-defences of the already prepared research proposals. At this level the belief is that as a student proceeds to the field, his topic should have been sanctioned by the committee and any outcome of the research cannot be very far from the expected by the faculty.

With this committee in place, cases of students failing the viva voce due to wrong or unresearchable topics would be minimized.

## Compilation of all Research Topics Ever Done in the Faculty

**Process** – Before this endeavour, there was no trace of any organized database where one would find all the areas already researched, whereby duplication or reproducing the same work could be quite easy. As of now, all this work has been compiled and deposited in the library and the faculty for students to view.

## Tracking the Performance of Students and Supervisors While on Research

**Process** – This is intended to counteract a less-committed student or less-committed or overloaded supervisor. Grievances between students and supervisors would

emerge about one failing the other due to non-appearance. At the moment, both the students and their supervisors have to give a monthly progress report to account for time spent, and in cases where one is dissatisfied with the other, a change of supervisor or student is possible based on these reports. This has proved beneficial, as the completion rate has dramatically improved.

## **Penalties for Delayed Completion**

**Process** – It was realized that a delayed student still consumes the time of the supervisor and may deny him an opportunity of being allocated another set of students or deny other students being allocated to that particular supervisor. As such, when a student delays on the program, but is still in the mandated time for graduation, he/she pays fifty percent of the tuition plus annual registration to remain a fully registered student. The cost is prohibitive but it has helped on the delay caused by problems of commitment.

## **Curriculum Review**

**Process** – This is the final bit that was deemed as central, and others merely rotate around it. This is the content that is given to the students to ensure that what they receive is worth the money and time spent while studying with a particular institution. The curriculum was reviewed in 2009 and it has made work more practical and trying to answer the business environment needs.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence reviewed in this paper shows that achieving low-quality postgraduate management often result from low expectations and students backgrounds, this is therefore catastrophic to the students and the universities. Indeed, as we have seen, expectations of students can be quite high and academic programs can be a positive experience for many students. Furthermore, taking postgraduate studies can suffice for some groups, however, policies about postgraduate studies assume the opposite.

At this stage, most studies recommend the policies should be redirected towards support for the postgraduate students. This is indeed one aspect of the faculty of management's original twin track strategy of 'better preservation' and 'better support,' where the latter is identified as helping postgraduate students into education, training and employment. However, as we have seen, critics claim that 'the better support' component of the postgraduate program strategy is underplayed. But, pol-

icy reformulation needs to go beyond a restoration of balance between these two policy arms. Rather, there needs to be a refocus on the value of postgraduate study in and of itself, both with regards to taught and research elements. For the students, this might focus on the positive experience of becoming a postgraduate student at IUIU or on students' prowess and resilience.

Education and employment of postgraduate students should be recognized as a component of 'better support' rather than individualized rational planning, where students are seen as obstacles.

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