


Quality Assurance of Higher Education Governance and Management: An Exploration of the Minimum Imperative for the Envisioned African Common Higher Education Space


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Abstract

In 2018, as part of the African higher education harmonisation drive, the African Union Commission (AUC) issued the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA). Within the ASG-QA, the AUC commits to promoting good governance and management in higher education institutions and provides governance and management as the second standard. However, there is a dearth of knowledge about the governance and management architecture for higher education institutions in the African higher education landscape that is either implicit or explicit in the ASG-QA. Against the above backdrop—using the ASG-QA as a source of data and content analysis as a data analysis method—the paper examines the governance and management imperative for higher education institutions in the African higher education landscape from the perspective of the AUC. Six themes relating to Africa’s higher education governance and management landscape emerged from the data: the role of the state (or government) in higher education, the internal governance framework, focus on quality and quality enhancement, observance of values of higher education, adherence to the principles of good governance, and capable leadership. The findings suggest that the governance and management architecture under the ASG-QA leans more towards providing common

standards for quality assessment of governance and management than creating an identical national higher education governance and management ecosystem across Africa.

Keywords: *Quality assurance; governance; higher education; harmonisation; standards*

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Introduction

Higher education in Africa has undergone an ideological shift—from being viewed as a luxury prior to 2000 to the post-2000 recognition of the sector as an engine of national development and an imperative for global competitiveness (African Union Commission [AUC], 2016, 2018; Doh, 2012). During the 1980s, on account of the findings of the rate-of-return studies conducted by World Bank economists, higher education in Africa was relegated to the position of a luxury the region could ill afford (Teferra, 2016). Until 2000, the World Bank promoted the notion of higher education as a sought but non-essential sector, though diametrical to the prevailing idea of the developmental university within the continent (see Coleman, 1986). For example, at a conference with the vice-chancellors of African universities held in Harare in 1986, the Bretton Woods institution contended that higher education in Africa was a luxury and that it was plausible for African countries to close universities at home and train graduates overseas (Banya & Elu, 2001). The (mis)conception of higher education as a private good—or yielding low returns—influenced many African governments and the major multilateral financiers, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to assign a lower priority to higher education (Bloom et al., 2014, 2007) and a higher priority to primary education, which was considered a public good. This stance partly explains why higher education was overlooked in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—the 2000 to 2015 global development agenda (Doh, 2012; Teferra, 2020). The little enthusiasm the stakeholders had for higher education resulted in gross underfunding of the sector (World Bank, 2000; Oanda & Sall, 2016; Teferra, 2016) amid escalating demand and triggered an erosion of the quality of higher education.

A 2000 World Bank and UNESCO sponsored report, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (World Bank, 2000), exonerated higher education, though belatedly, from being a luxury in view of its enormous external benefits and conferred upon it the status of a sine qua non for national social and economic development (World Bank, 2000). The higher education and development community has credited *Peril and Promise* with, inter alia, giving new legitimacy to higher education (Bloom et al., 2007), reorienting donor policies towards according greater attention to higher education in partner countries (Salmi, 2016, 2020), as well as providing the justification for improving the quality, relevance, and attractiveness of higher education in Africa. Therefore, the imperative to leverage higher education to engender Africa's development and facilitate the transition of the region to a knowledge economy—as a result of its emancipation by *Peril and Promise*—has ignited the drive to revitalize higher education in the region with the harmonization of higher education among the flagship programs (Oyewole, 2013).

In 2007, under the AUC's *Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education in Africa* (2006–2015), the Ministers of Education of the AUC adopted the African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy against the backdrop of lack of comparability among national higher education systems in Africa. Owing to historical legacies, African countries have diverse higher education systems that are symptomatic of the Anglophone, Lusophone, Francophone, and Arabophone traditions. The diverse higher education systems pose

bureaucratic obstacles to the mutual recognition of academic qualifications as well as the mobility of students and academics, thus militating against the continent's integration drive in general and academic integration in particular. Harmonization of higher education, therefore, aims at ensuring that structures and systems are compatible and thereby creating trust in one another's qualifications so as to promote the mobility of academics, researchers, and students (Bloom et al., 2014; AUC, 2018). It is further viewed as a strategy for safeguarding quality and enhancing the competitiveness of qualifications in the global employment market (Mohamedbhai, 2014). The anticipated outcome of the harmonization efforts is a common African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS) (Oyewole, 2013; Nabaho, 2017; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2019) and improvement in the quality of higher education in Africa.

There are significant parallels between the African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy (2007) and the Bologna (Declaration) Process (1999) in Europe. Both policy documents constitute overarching transnational frameworks for narrowing variance among the higher education systems of countries within the two distinct and culturally divergent higher education systems. There was a common higher education space (or area) that was integral to both policy frameworks. The Bologna Process envisioned the creation—and actually delivered—a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010 while the African Higher Education Strategy envisions the creation of an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS). Finally, both continental policy documents gave birth to context-sensitive Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education in the respective higher education jurisdictions. The above documents suggest, specifically for the African context, that policy borrowing or mimetic isomorphism—the imitation of policies and strategies already successful in other regions of the world (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)—partially influenced the African higher education harmonization efforts as well as the tools for the harmonization strategy.

The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) document was finalised in 2018 and constitutes a key instrument of the African Higher Education Strategy. This new instrument for quality assurance of higher education in the African higher education landscape has been extensively promoted at the highest political levels. The ASG-QA includes 13 institutional standards, namely: (a) vision, mission, and strategic objectives; (b) governance and management; (c) human resources; (d) financial management; (e) infrastructure and facilities; (f) student recruitment, admission, certification, and support services; (g) design, approval, monitoring, and evaluation of study programs; (h) teaching, learning and assessment; (i) research and innovation; (j) community engagement; (k) information management systems; (l) public communication; and (m) collaboration, staff, and student mobility (AUC, 2018). Although it is a new initiative, there is evidence that educational leaders and managers within the government space have for some time emphasized the linkage between quality assurance and quality improvement in higher education (Hayward, 2006). With the proliferation of private providers of higher education, the public needs assurance that the education service provided by both the private and public sector players meets local and international standards.

The ASG-QA, despite providing enormous opportunities for scholarship and responding to the plethora of contemporary challenges confronting Africa's higher education landscape, remains under-researched. Consequently, there exists a dearth of knowledge about the governance and management imperative for higher education institutions in the African higher education landscape from the perspective of the AUC. This article focuses on the governance and management standard of the ASG-QA. In the ASG-QA, the AUC commits to promoting leadership and good governance in higher education in a bid to ensure that higher education works in the continent's interests (AUC, 2018). This is consistent with the extant literature, which recognizes governance as a major leverage for scaling up the quality in all facets of higher education (see World Bank, 2000; Hénard & Mitterle, 2009). On the academic front, higher education governance remains grossly under-researched in Africa (Bigab et al., 2018). Whereas some studies have been conducted on higher education governance in Africa (e.g. Varghese, 2013, 2016; Melu, 2016; Nabaho, 2019), it is important to note that these studies tackle the subject from the perspective of national-level legal and policy frameworks as well

as the institutional policy regimes rather than from that of supranational or transnational policy frameworks. On the other hand, the extant studies seldom interrogate the subject through the prism of quality assurance. Finally, notwithstanding the importance of governance in higher education, it is not understood how effectively governance can be measured, at least from the quality assurance perspective.

Against the above backdrop, we examine the governance and management architecture in the ASG-QA document to answer the following question: what does the AUC spell out in the ASG-QA as the governance and management imperative for higher education institutions in the African higher education landscape?

Literature Review

The concept of higher education governance is susceptible to multiple interpretations owing to variances in its definition and application across countries and regions. The definitions vary, though with some commonalities, depending on whether governance is being conceptualized from the institutional or systemic level. Using the higher education institution as a unit of analysis, Oxford University (2006) cited in Trakman (2008, p. 64) defines governance as a “processes of decision-making within an institution [which]... enable[s] an institution to set its policies and objectives, [how] to achieve them, and to monitor its progress towards their achievement.” The majority of the definitions of higher education governance hinge on both institutional and systemic levels. For example, Neave (2006, p. 28) regards higher education governance as “a conceptual shorthand for the way higher education systems and institutions are organized and managed,” while OECD (2008, p. 68) defines it as “the structures, relationships and processes through which, at both national and institutional levels, policies for tertiary education are developed, implemented and reviewed.” The diversity of the definitions notwithstanding, decision-making, through the structures and processes of the higher education system or institutions, appears to be the hallmark of higher education governance.

Higher education governance can be viewed through the national and institutional level lenses. Clark's triangle (1983) of higher education coordination provides a good starting point for understanding cross-national higher education governance practices. The triangle draws a distinction between a state control model, a Humboldtian model of academic self-rule and an Anglo-American market-oriented model (Dobbins et al., 2011).

In the state-control model, the state—through the ministry responsible for (higher) education—exercises regulatory province over, inter alia, access conditions to higher education, the study content, the degree requirements, the examination system, and the appointment and remuneration of academic staff (Dobbins & Leišyte, 2014), while the academy is responsible for the regulation of internal university affairs concerning the content of education and research. The state-control model limits the autonomy of universities and is buttressed by the notion that universities are rational instruments at the disposal of the state to meet national priorities (Olsen, 2009; Dobbins et al., 2011) through research and education. The role of the academic oligarchy and the market is minimal within the state control model (Clark, 1983).

On the contrary, the Humboldtian model views the university as a self-governing community of scholars. Scholars describe this model using concepts such as “academic self-governance”—characterized by “weak university management, strong self-regulation and collegial control by the professoriate” (Dobbins et al., 2011, p. 671) over the academic affairs—and the academic oligarchy, which connotes self-regulation of academic affairs by academics through the academic senates.

The market-oriented model posits that the efficacy of universities stands to be enhanced when they operate as economic enterprises within the national, regional, and global higher education markets (Marginson & Considine, 2000). The model underscores the liberalization of markets by states with a view to increasing both the quality and variety of services offered within the national higher education spaces (Jongbloed, 2003).

The marketized policies, which are integral to the model, aim to stimulate competition for students and financial resources as well as enhance the pace of higher education institutions to adapt to the existing constraints and opportunities. In a marketized environment, the state is responsible for ensuring quality and transparency in the sector (Ferlie et al., 2009).

van Vught (1989) reduced Clark's triangle to two typologies of higher education governance systems to reflect the relationship between the state and higher education institutions: a state control model and a state supervising model. In the state control model, as discussed previously, the state steers higher education directly. This contrasts with the state supervising model, in which the evaluative state steers higher education at a distance (Neave, 1998) through university councils and employs indirect steering instruments such as funding allocations, evaluation, and program accreditation to shape the university strategy (Donina & Hasanefendic, 2019).

The post-2000 higher education governance reforms in Africa can be nested in van Vught's (1989) topology. Africa has witnessed a shift from direct state control of universities to state supervision of higher education institutions (see Bisaso, 2017; Oanda & Sall, 2016; Sall & Oanda, 2014; Varghese, 2016). Therefore, the role of the state has metamorphosed from direct steering of higher education to providing a framework for effective functioning of the higher education system and ensuring that higher education serves the interests of the public, is equitable, and is responsive to societal needs (Varghese, 2016).

Higher education governance can also be analyzed from the standpoint of the internal university governance dynamics within the shared governance architecture. The models of university governance that feature in the scholarship on internal university governance are the collegial model, the corporate model, and the stakeholder model. The collegial (or traditional) model vests the governance of universities in their academic staff (Moodie & Eustace, 1974; Trakman, 2008; Rowlands, 2017) through either granting expansive governance powers to the academic senate or significant faculty representation on the corporate governance organ, or both (Miller, 1999; Jordan, 2001). The model is epitomized by informal decision-making and consensus-building through committees (Ngo, 2014). The corporate model of university governance, which emerged in the 1980s, is based on corporate governance principles and is intended to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of universities. The model is characterized by a small lay-dominated corporate governance organ (Trakman, 2008) and is underpinned by the New Public Management (NPM) orthodoxy. It advocates for university councils to be populated by experts in fields such as human resources, finance, law, and education. The stakeholder model of university governance vests governance in a range of stakeholders, including, but not limited to, students, academic staff, alumni, industry, government, and the public (Hill, et al., 2001; Longin, 2002) and views the university as a stakeholder organization.

The review of the literature reveals an abundance of literature on higher education governance. However, the extant scholarship examines university governance from a national perspective rather than a supranational angle, is skewed towards public higher education institutions, and rarely approaches the subject through the lens of quality assurance.

Methods

Conceptual Framework

The interpretive paradigm underpinned the study, and we employed document analysis as the sole data collection method. The ASG-QA provided the data to answer the research question, which involves understanding what the AUC spell out in the ASG-QA as the governance and management imperative for higher education institutions in the African higher education landscape. The ASG-QA, in which governance and management comprise the second standard for higher education institutions in Africa, was used as a

stand-alone document rather than to complement other methods, because it is a rich source in the sense that it not only stipulates the standards that are applicable in the African higher education landscape but also delves into the background of the development of the standards and guidelines. In this respect, ASG-QA provide perspectives on what is stipulated in the ASG-QA and also insights into why it could have been stipulated. A document review guide was used as the data collection tool.

Analysis Strategy: Content Analysis

Content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 18–19) and served as the data analysis strategy. The three steps of analyzing documents—“skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32)—were followed during the process of data analysis. We used open coding while reading the aspects related to the governance and management standard in the ASG-QA. While reading the text, we paid attention to both the language used as well as the context in which it was produced to obtain insights relevant to the research question. The language of the text was examined, and it informed the classification of the data into categories that represented similar meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Six data-driven themes emerged from the codes and the results have been reported against them. We arrived at the relationship among the themes and the possible explanations of the themes during the process of data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The ASG-QA is a public document freely available on the internet. In this respect, permission for further analysis of the document is implied. However, during data analysis, care was taken not to misrepresent the words or change their meaning by presenting excerpts from the ASG-QA document.

Results

Skimming, reading, and interpreting the ASG-QA document led to six themes: (1) the role of the state (or government) in higher education; (2) the internal governance framework; (3) focus on quality and quality enhancement; (4) observance of values of higher education; (5) adherence to the principles of good governance; and (6) capable leadership. Each of these themes is described below:

Role of the State (or Government) in Higher Education

The ASG-QA is non-prescriptive regarding the relationship between the state and higher education or the appropriate model for steering higher education within the national jurisdictions. Therefore, the role of the state—or the steering model—for higher education is implied from the provisions of the ASG-QA. Guideline (e) of the governance and management standard of the ASG-QA states that “[t]he institution... makes responsible use of its autonomy” (AUC, 2018, p. 14). This suggests that the AUC requires the states to steer higher education at a distance or to provide space for higher education institutions to operate rather than directly controlling the sector. The assertion above can be buttressed by the idea that the ASG-QA provides the basis for quality assessment at the institutional level and, that, by insinuation, institutions can be assessed on whether they have exercised autonomy responsibly only if autonomy has been assigned to them via the national higher education regulatory frameworks. Therefore, the state-control model in which the state is directly responsible for most facets of university governance would run counter to the AUC higher education agenda. The autonomy that is granted to higher education institutions can be of varying degrees. However, a glimpse at the level of discretion granted to higher education institutions within the ASG-QA reveals that the institutions have been granted considerable autonomy.

The autonomy of higher education institutions in the ASG-QA, which is a pointer to the state-supervising model, is further implied in the form of the ASG-QA. The ASG-QA has three parts. Part A presents the guidelines and standards for internal quality assurance of higher education institutions, while Part B deals with the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance. Part C focuses on internal quality assurance for internal quality assurance agencies. The presence of external quality agencies in AUC member states, which act as intermediary or buffer institutions between the state and higher education institutions, corroborates the earlier assertion that steering higher education at a distance should be the norm rather than the exception in the current African higher education landscape and the envisioned African Higher Education and Research Space. In an environment characterized by state control, the functions which have been entrusted to these intermediary agencies arms of the state—for example accreditation of institutions and their programs, and quality audits—would ordinarily be performed by the ministries responsible for (higher) education. These functions, though performed by semi-autonomous agencies of the state, constitute the alternative steering instruments in the era of the shift from the state-control model to the state-supervising model.

Finally, the adoption of the state supervising model is latent in the rest of the standards (and guidelines) of the ASG-QA. Under the state control model, the state has province over human resource management, financial management, student admission, and curriculum matters of public higher education institutions. Within the ASG-QA, higher education institutions have been accorded considerable latitude over these matters but within the national regulatory frameworks.

Internal Governance Framework

The ASG-QA document stipulates the minimum governance structure for higher education institutions in Africa. Specifically, the ASG-QA document specifies that higher education institutions in Africa should comprise “[the] relevant governance and management bodies, such as the University [or Governing] Council, Senate, Management Board, Student Body; and various committees, each with a clear mandate, duties, responsibilities, powers, privileges and tenure” (AUC, 2018, p. 14). The ASG-QA, therefore, prescribes the minimum governance organs and recognizes that other governance organs may co-exist with those that have been prescribed based on the different contexts. The governance structures in the ASG-QA point to the notion that a higher education institution should, at a minimum, consist of organs responsible for corporate governance (the university council), academic governance (the senate), and administration (the management board) as well an institution-wide organ for students.

The ASG-QA focuses on the form of the governance organs of higher education institutions rather than the substance. This inference is evident in the non-prescriptive outlook of the standards and guidelines regarding the functions of the governance organs as well as the modus operandi for populating the shared governance organs. The standards and guidelines relegate these governance issues to national higher education spaces for context-specific prescriptions rather than providing a one-size-fits-all approach, which might be diametrical to national contexts. This attests to the idea that the harmonization of higher education is not analogous to homogenization. However, despite being overly non-prescriptive, the standards and guidelines are unequivocal—though without specifying the number(s)—on students’ representation in the governance organs, particularly the university council and the senate, as a minimum governance standard. Therefore, from the AUC perspective, students, through representation, are participants rather than spectators in the academic and corporate governance of their institutions. However, the governance and management standard is equally non-committal on whether the participation of students should be in the governance bodies or on the committees of the governance bodies.

Focus on Quality and Quality Enhancement

The standards and guidelines obligate higher education institutions, either at continental or national level, to have a robust quality assurance (QA) infrastructure. Guideline (c) of the governance and management standard asks whether “[t]he institution has a QA policy and structure, which flow down through all levels” (AUC, 2018, p. 14). This excerpt calls for higher education institutions to pay attention to quality. However, what constitutes quality in the context of higher education in the region is fluid. The criterion-reference perspective of quality in higher education suggests that quality in African higher education connotes the extent to which the minimum standards and guidelines are achieved (the threshold quality) or the degree to which the standards are surpassed, which connotes excellence. However, we must add a caveat to the assertion above: there is a possibility of gleaning other perspectives of quality in African higher education from the standards and guidelines that are outside the scope of this study. The quality assurance practices that should be integral to the quality assurance policy of the institutions are intended to provide assurance to the stakeholders that the standards have been achieved. Similarly, the quality assurance structures that permeate all the levels are geared towards providing an institutional framework for monitoring and evaluating quality, in line with the policy and the practices, as well as instituting and implementing recovery measures in instances where the performance may fall below the standards.

The attention to quality, which is unequivocal in the standards and guidelines, is not an end in itself. Rather, it is intended to improve the quality of the higher education provision and to engender a quality culture in tertiary education institutions in Africa. The ASG-QA states that “[t]he specific purpose of the ASG-QA is, therefore, to support HEIs [higher education institutions]... in Member States in Africa to...(c) ensure quality improvement/enhancement of higher education on the continent; (e) support HEIs to develop a sustainable quality culture” (AUC, 2018, p. 10). This is against the backdrop of the perceived decline of the quality of higher education and the imperative to align higher education to the development needs of the continent.

Observance of the Values of Higher Education

Higher education has three principal values: autonomy, academic freedom, and accountability. However, only autonomy and accountability are traceable within the governance and management standard of the ASG-QA. A distinction ought to be drawn between the values of higher education and those of a higher education institution. Whereas the values of higher education are shared among the higher education community, the values of higher education institutions may vary from institution to institution. With respect to the value of institutional autonomy, the AUC, in the principles of the ASG-QA, is committed to respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions. The word “autonomy” appears as a guideline of the governance and management standard. This autonomy suggests that higher education institutions should be insulated from undue external influence in matters such as establishing and implementing policies relating to teaching, research and community engagement and determining the organizational structure, appointing staff, determining the terms and conditions of staff, and controlling finances. The use of the expression “responsible use of... autonomy” (AUC, 2018, p. 14) in a guideline of the ASG-QA suggests that the autonomy of higher education is not absolute: autonomy should go hand in hand with the social (or societal) responsibilities of the institutions. Viewed through this lens, higher education institutions should—through their triple missions (teaching, research, and community engagement)—be responsive to the needs of society and provide solutions to contemporary societal problems. The drive towards the autonomy of higher education institutions could be geared towards making them responsive to the needs of society.

The ASG-QA is unequivocal on accountability of the university. Specifically, two guidelines of the second standard are emphatic on the subject. Guideline (d) demands that higher education institutions should have “clear communication systems and networks for the promotion of internal and external information dissemination for public accountability” (AUC, 2018, p. 14), while Guideline (h) underscores the imperative of higher education institutions to publish and disseminate “on a regular basis, impartial and objective

qualitative and quantitative information about courses offered, research undertaken and community services” (AUC, 2018, p. 15). The guidelines mentioned above are silent on the stakeholders to whom universities should account. This means that a higher education institution is a multi-stakeholder organization. Therefore, accountability by a higher education institution can be multi-directional; it can be to the government, students, staff, proprietors, boards of trustees, partners, and the community. Accountability, which is prominent in the ASG-QA, cannot be divorced from the role of the state in higher education discussed in a previous section. Steering higher education at a distance necessitates that accountability by higher education institutions to the state is strengthened owing to the interest that the state has in the sector.

Adherence to the Principles of Good Governance

Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, envisioned that the African university, in addition to promoting development, would serve as a model environment for the practice of good governance (United Nations Information Service [UNIS], 2000). Good governance has several pillars: participation; accountability; transparency; responsiveness; equity and inclusion; consensus-orientation; efficiency and effectiveness; and the rule of law. Despite the apparent wording overlaps in the guidelines relating to the governance and management standard, four out of the eight pillars of good governance are explicit in it. These are evident in the table below.

Table 1: *Pillars of Good Governance in the ASG-QA*

Pillar of good governance	Guidelines of the governance and management standard that attest to the pillar
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institution enables students to participate in decision-making in relevant governance bodies. • The institution ensures regular consultations with stakeholders.
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institution has clear communication systems and networks for the promotion of internal and external information dissemination for public accountability. • The institution ensures regular consultations with stakeholders, reports and follows up actions on key issues of policy, and operations to promote quality, cohesion, harmony, and identity within the institution.
Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institution has clear communication systems and networks for the promotion of internal and external information dissemination for public accountability. • The institution emphasizes ethics, transparency, and academic integrity throughout its teaching, learning, and research activities. • The institution has policies and activated procedures to manage conflict of interest.
Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institution has effective, systematic, timely, and fair processes for the investigation of complaints, grievances, and appeals by students, staff, and other stakeholders.
Consensus-orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The committee system assures a consensus-orientation.

The notion of good governance is evident in the ASG-QA. Good governance could be directed towards addressing the governance failures that militate against the effectiveness of higher education institutions. Whereas the pillar of consensus-orientation is not supported by overt statements in the standards and guidelines, it is implied in the committee system for the governance organs. The committee system in higher education institutions aims to forge consensus on a number of issues.

Capable Leadership

The guidelines emphasize the imperative to have leaders at both the steering core and the academic heartland who can steer the institutions in turbulent times, characterized by uncertainty, and who are able to deploy the limited resources for the furtherance of the goals of the institution. Guideline (a) of the second standard requires the institution to have “qualified, competent and experienced leadership to oversee the development and management of a quality culture within the institution” (AUC, 2018, p. 14). The standard could have been influenced by the perceived leadership deficits in the higher education institutions.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Discussion

The findings provide insights into higher education governance in Africa from a transnational perspective as opposed to the previous studies that approach the topical issue through national lenses. The ASG-QA, while respecting the diverse national and institutional contexts, has created common ground regarding the higher education governance architecture for the African higher education landscape. The ASG-QA document is, therefore, a transnational catalyst for change in the higher education governance domain as it provides a baseline for states to reconfigure their policies and legal frameworks. In view of the above, it is anticipated that the ASG-QA will transform the patterns of governance at institutional and national levels in a bid to align the current national and institutional higher education governance arrangements to the governance and management standard. However, the reconfiguration is unlikely to occasion similarity in higher education or uniformity in systems and institutions, since the idea behind harmonization of higher education facets such as governance and management is to reduce variance among higher education systems—or create comparable systems—rather than to homogenize them. Therefore, the contextual peculiarities among the states and institutions will arguably breed some level of variance in the substance rather than the form of the higher education governance architecture on the continent.

The ASG-QA document has tacitly defined the role of the state in higher education. It is undoubtable in the governance and management standard, as well as other sections, that the states in the African higher education landscape should, in case they still subscribe to or retain vestiges of the control model, loosen their grip over higher education institutions. This should happen through according them organizational and financial autonomy. Studies that utilize national-level higher education policy and legal frameworks (e.g. Bisaso, 2011, 2017; Varghese, 2013, 2016; Melu, 2016; Nabaho, 2019) revealed that a number of states in Africa have, since 2000, retreated from the state-control model of higher education governance and embraced the state supervising model. An inference from the discourse above is that the dominant higher education governance model in AUC member states could have shaped AUC’s perspective regarding how the sector should be steered at the moment and in the African Higher Education and Research Space that is envisioned under the African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy. Therefore, mimetic isomorphism, or policy borrowing, from the states by the AUC as far as the governance and management standard is concerned, is a possible explanatory factor for the convergence among the higher education steering models at the national and supranational levels. Consistent with the state supervision (or steering-at-a-distance model), national quality assurance agencies have been established to oversee higher education. The decision to loosen the state’s grip on higher education institutions, both at the supranational and national levels, could have been

informed by studies that point to a nexus between institutional autonomy and the effectiveness of higher education institutions (see Aghion et al., 2010) and policy borrowing from advanced higher education systems of Europe, the United States, and Australia. However, within the steering-at-a-distance model, the state remains a player in higher education through providing the policy and legal framework for the sector and funding higher education.

The ASG-QA maintains strategic silence, by design, over the composition and functions of the key internal university governance organs. Therefore, the internal governance model for higher education institutions has not been prescribed in the ASG-QA. The non-prescriptive nature of the standards and guidelines suggests that national higher education systems can either embrace the collegial model of internal university governance, and especially the variant that calls for significant representation of academic staff in the corporate governance body (Jordan, 2001; Trakman, 2008), the corporate model which is epitomized by a small lay-dominated university council formed around competences in fields such as finance, law, business, human resources, and higher education (Giovanna, 2013; Rowlands, 2017), the stakeholder model which necessitates representation of the key stakeholders—internal and external—in the university council (Trakman, 2008), or opt for a hybrid model that incorporates elements from all the models above. The choice of the model at national level can, in part, be informed by the challenges and the cultures in the higher education system.

The non-prescriptive nature of the standard and the attendant guidelines on the functions of the academic senate—or the supreme academic authority in a higher education institution—as well as its membership gives the states flexibility to choose between a unicameral governance model and a bicameral governance model. The preferred internal governance model defines the relationship between the university council and the academic senate in the same way the national governance model defines the relationship between the state and universities. In a unicameral governance arrangement, the academic senate functions as a committee of the university council (Rowlands, 2017). In such an environment, the decisions of the academic senate require approval by the university council. On the contrary, in a bicameral model, both the university council and the university senate have decision-making powers; the university council is responsible for corporate governance matters, while the university senate has province over academic matters or aspects related to teaching, learning, and research (Amaral et al., 2002). The discourse above gives insights into how the texture as well as the composition of the corporate governance body may vary from one political jurisdiction to another and, in some instances, from one institution to another.

The liberal outlook of the ASG-QA in relation to the composition of the academic senate leaves a number of options at the disposal of higher education institutions. The university senate, under the leadership of the university's chief executive officer, may be composed of the professoriate, heads of academic units, or experts in academic governance. The above notwithstanding, the students ought to be represented in the academic governance and corporate governance organs. The recurrent debate within the African higher education landscape is whether the students should be represented in the principal bodies or on committees of the principal governance organs (see Nabaho, 2019).

The findings also demonstrate the need to have capable leadership at the steering core and academic heartland in higher education institutions. This could have been influenced by the current practice in some national jurisdictions, though the trend is changing, under which the vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellor, dean, and academic department chairs are appointed on the basis of their research and publication profiles, with little or no regard to their leadership and managerial standing. However, this does not imply that the leaders, especially the chief executive officers of higher education institutions, their deputies, and those at the academic heartland, who have performed teaching and research should be disregarded. The ideal chief executive officers and academic leaders should have leadership and management skills, but also experience in teaching and research. Similarly, the system of electing some leaders, which is explicit in the modes of assumption of office that we examined earlier, is often faulted for breeding weak leadership in the institutions.

Higher education has values (academic freedom, autonomy, and accountability) which should be guarded so as to enhance the performance of higher education institutions. At the AU level, autonomy and accountability are part and parcel of the ASG-QA. However, academic freedom—a notion which safeguards academics’ freedom “to teach freely, undertake research of their own interest, and communicate the findings and ideas openly and without any fear of prosecution” (Teferra & Altbach, 2004, p. 40)—does not feature in the governance and management standard. The absence of academic freedom runs counter to commitment of the AUC to revitalize higher education. As Teferra and Altbach (p. 40) have rightly observed, academic freedom is important in “nurturing national academic and scholarly culture.”

Conclusions

In view of the findings, we conclude that the drive towards strengthening governance and management at the level of the academy is being undertaken as a means to an end. Arguably, this drive is geared towards enhancing the performance of the institutions since the quality of a higher education institution is closely related to the quality of governance and management. Finally, harmonization of higher education, to which governance and management is integral, does not connote homogenization of the higher education systems of the member countries of a supranational higher education space. Therefore, whereas the form of the governance and management landscape may converge, there is a potential for divergences to exist in the substance.

Recommendations

In view of the findings and discussion, we recommend that individual AUC member states, in a bid to comply with the ASG-QA, should avoid the temptation of creating homogeneous national higher education systems. In other words, the national contexts should shape the higher education system ensuring compliance with the minimum standards. Finally, the AUC member states should audit their governance and management architecture with a view to identifying areas of mismatch with the minimum standards in the ASG-QA and initiate changes in the national regulatory frameworks for higher education.

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