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# Enhancing quality of tertiary education through programme accreditation: A case of Botswana

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## Abstract

This study presents narrated facts about the complex nature of accrediting tertiary education programs in Botswana. Content analysis procedures were employed to characterise the accreditation process experienced by local tertiary institutions. The accreditation process experienced hiccups that include; long-established institution having their own quality assurance procedures; programmes being purchased from external institutions; elusive on-line and distance education programmes offered by cross-border institutions. The Government of Botswana must strengthen the Tertiary Education Council by giving it capacity to grow beyond its current status hence assume full control of tertiary education in the Country.

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*Keywords:* Botswana; education policy; programme accreditation; tertiary education; quality assurance.

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## 1. Introduction

The Tertiary Education Council (TEC) of Botswana was established by an act of parliament in 1999 to regulate tertiary education and also oversee its quality and relevance (TEC, 2008). Establishment of the Council was one of the major milestones of the National Development Plan 9 (NDP 9) of the Botswana Government. The NDP 9 recommended establishment of the TEC to oversee policy coordination, planning and development, funding and quality assurance of tertiary education (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 1996). After being established, one of the first activities of TEC was to formulate Tertiary Education Policy for the Country. The Tertiary Education Policy was finalised in 2008; the policy was framed around a thematic drive towards a knowledge based society (TEC, 2008). The policy was formulated on the backdrop of a changing tertiary education landscape in the Country that was increasingly becoming complex. The landscape was characterised by increase in tertiary education students' enrolment numbers, multiplication of tertiary education institutions, mushrooming private tertiary education providers, increased incidences of virtual universities offering on-line programmes, and

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increased incidences of cross-border programmes; all this taking place against dwindling educational resources; a situation that had the potential to compromise quality and relevance of Botswana's tertiary education.

Botswana's achievements in higher education can only be described quantitatively as evidenced by increased student enrolment in tertiary institutions; the Revised National Policy on Education alluded to the fact that the dramatic increase in student numbers was not matched with qualitative improvements (Ministry of Education, 1994), hence questions about quality of tertiary education in the Country. Quality of higher education is not only a concern to Botswana; other educational systems around the world are grappling with the same issue. Haug (2003) commended European countries for their 'Bologna Declaration' which called for coherent, compatible and competitive higher education. The Declaration, according to Haug, presented a clear operational criterion for introducing an articulated undergraduate-postgraduate qualifications and credit systems. Haug (2003) further noted that while harmonisation of European programmes was credible, quality assurance mechanism also should have been spelt out. In Australia, there was pressure to deliver mass higher education, this coupled with the advent of electronic communication systems and a diversity of education providers made quality assurance a challenging endeavour. It is imperative to have quality assurance mechanisms if Governments must get value for their money and institutions must maintain high academic standards (Anderson, Johnson & Milligan, 2000). Ziguras (2003) compared experiences of New Zealand, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia in handling trans-national tertiary education. All the four countries, according to Ziguras, had reservations about cross-border tertiary programs that would pass more for business enterprises than service oriented educational programs. The Countries were all struggling with quality control issues. The programmes were run by foreign awarding institutions that have their own standards and quality assurance mechanism. The question then lied with ways to reconcile and harmonise standards of foreign programs with local standards.

The complex nature of quality assurance of tertiary education programmes has driven nations to the concept and practice of programme accreditation. Anderson et. al (2000) defined accreditation as a process whereby an authority, recognised by institutions and government, determines that an institution offering courses in higher education may become self-accrediting, or offer its own higher education awards subject to periodic reviews. An accrediting agency certifies that the standards of a course are appropriate for the award to which it leads; and that methods are appropriate for the purpose. Appropriate and reliable accreditation reassures the public that courses, programs and degrees offered by tertiary education institutions meet acceptable academic and professional standards (Salmi, 2000). According to Botswana's Tertiary Education Council, accrediting a programme confirms that systems for organising appropriate resources and management of quality have been implemented as designed for the programme of teaching, learning and assessment for a period not less than three years. The programme should have a planned impact on learners, the economy and the broad society of Botswana. Accreditation is thus a confirmation of the ability of an institution to design and implement quality education and /or training services at tertiary level (TEC, 2009).

While educational systems are slowly moving towards accreditation as a quality assurance management technique, Salmi, (2000) observed that many developing nations did not yet have established accreditation and evaluation systems. According to Salmi, such nations do not even have necessary information on the foreign programmes that can enable them to detect fraud or substandard offerings. Added to the low capability of the nations, a large number of accreditation criteria for such nations were designed to evaluate campus-based, and not online, distance, and cross-border programmes. Being a developing country, the Tertiary Education Council of Botswana finds itself faced with inherent dilemma of having to accredit tertiary programmes while operating within a matrix of educational forces such as public institutions, private institutions, cross-border and virtual institutions. This study presents narrated facts about the complex nature of accrediting tertiary education programmes in a developing country. The study utilised content analysis procedures on registration and accreditation application documents from local tertiary institutions. The history and stories extracted from the documents, coupled with narrated facts from institutional staff were used to the profile the procedures and highlight complexities associated with each stage of tertiary programme accreditation in Botswana.

## **2. Tertiary education landscape of Botswana**

In Botswana context, a tertiary institution is an institution that awards qualifications that are comparable and of equivalent merit to similar qualifications awarded in respect of programmes offered in and by a public tertiary

institution in the Country, which by extension would be the University of Botswana (TEC, 2008). Most tertiary institutions award qualifications at Diploma (attainment of 60 credit course work), Bachelors' Degrees (120 credits), and Graduate degrees (minimum of 72 credits to attain PhD). There are a few certificate programmes offered at tertiary institutions, such programmes usually offer special qualifications over and above one's degree qualifications (TEC, 2008). There are three kinds of tertiary institutions in Botswana; they are public institutions, Government institutions, and private institutions.

### *2.1 Public institutions*

Public institutions are Government funded but autonomous in governance. They have their own governing councils that approve major policy and developmental decisions. The University of Botswana (UB) and Botswana College of Agriculture (BCA) are the only two public institutions in the Country. However the BCA houses the UB's Faculty of Agriculture; therefore the UB is directly responsible for quality of BCA's programmes.

#### *2.1.1 Quality assurance status*

Being the oldest public institution, the University of Botswana (UB) has its own quality assurance mechanism. Before 1999, the UB managed quality of its programmes by use of external examiners sourced from other reputable universities around the world; this arrangement helped the university to benchmark its programmes against equivalent programmes of other universities. After 1999 UB established a Centre for Academic Development (CAD) whose function among others was to facilitate the development of excellent academic programmes at the UB and its affiliated institutions through implementation of academic quality management policy. The policy facilitated for quality assurance frameworks that includes internal and external programmes reviews and audits (CAD, 2009). It is also noteworthy that the University of Botswana has five-year cycles of externally commissioned programme reviews that help keep the programmes at international standards.

### *2.2 Government institutions*

Government institutions, like public institutions are government funded. The difference between them and public institutions is that they are run or operated by the government. The institutions are placed under training division of relevant government Ministries. For example, there are five teacher training colleges that train primary and secondary school teachers at diploma level. The five institutions fall under the Teacher Training and Development (TT&D) Department of the Ministry of Education. There are also several vocational training institutes that train in various vocational fields like construction, electrical, agriculture, technology and many others. The Vocational Colleges are administered by the Department of Technical and Vocational Training (Ministry of Education, 2009). There are six Nursing Colleges spread around the country, the Nursing College are administered by the Ministry of Health but also affiliated to the UB.

All Government institutions that offer programmes at diploma level are affiliated to the UB. It manages programme quality at these institutions through the directorate of Affiliated Institutions of the Centre for Academic Development (CAD). The Directorate approves programmes from the Government Institutions, it also moderates the assessment and examinations processes at the institutions, thereby ensuring that programmes from the Government institutions meet the UB standards, and by extension international standards (CAD, 2009). Managing quality at Government institutions gives the UB extra credibility as a manager of the qualification frameworks in the Country; by the same line of reasoning the UB would pass for an accrediting body for the Government Institutions, an arrangement that has been in place and working well for ten years.

### *2.3 Private tertiary institutions*

Private tertiary institutions in Botswana are those institutions offering tertiary education and/or training services, inclusive of assessment. A tertiary institution must have a comprehensive system of policies and procedures in place to ensure a continuous quality and improvement of programmes of the teaching, learning and assessment offered (TEC, 2008). There are several such institutions in Botswana; most of the institutions were established in the last ten years. Institutions like Limkokwing University, Ba Isago, ABM College, Botswana Accountancy College, NIIT

Botswana, and Gaborone Institute of Professional Studies (GIPS) each have several campuses in Botswana. However, the institutions are also affiliated to universities outside the Country, which brings to question, the issue of quality assurance.

Each of the private tertiary institutions reported in their websites, fliers and booklets that they offer quality programmes. They give their potential clients assurance by claiming to be affiliated to universities outside or claiming to have multiple establishments around the world. The fact that the institutions are affiliated to universities outside, and the fact that some of the courses the institutions run actually belong to those cross-order universities give such institutions and their programmes enough credibility to be allowed to operate in Botswana. However, there still remains a question of whether the programmes have planned impact on learners, the economy and the broad society of Botswana (TEC, 2008), hence the requirement by TEC to accredit programmes for such institutions.

### **3. The accreditation process**

Accreditation of tertiary institutions in Botswana is granted to named institutions that have complied with the registration process that apply particularly to private institutions. For an institution to be accredited it must have developed programme that are beneficial to Botswana economy, the programmes must be sufficiently funded; the programme must be well resourced with staff, physical premises and facilities. There must be evidenced of inbuilt internal and external assessments that are integrated with the teaching and learning processes in the institution. The programmes must result in their planned impact for learner achievement and relevance to stated educational, economic and/or socio-cultural needs of Botswana and her citizens (TEC, 2008).

#### *3.1 Accreditation of programmes from public institutions*

Since the Tertiary Education Council is at its infancy stage, it does not accredit programmes from public institutions yet. Instead it uses programme standards found at public tertiary institutions to benchmark programmes of private tertiary institutions during accreditation. The requirement is that private institutions should offer programmes that are comparable and of equivalent merit to similar qualifications awarded in respect of programmes offered in and by a public tertiary institution which at the moment is the University of Botswana.

##### *3.1.1 Accreditation dilemma*

The tertiary education council was formulated to oversee policy coordination, planning and development, funding and quality assurance of tertiary education in Botswana. It became operational only eight years ago and found an established university system with its own quality assurance mechanism. This scenario probably makes it difficult for the TEC to take over the regulation of programmes at the University of Botswana and Botswana College of Agriculture. The University systems are well established, with checks and balances to ensure quality and maintenance of standards. The Centre for Academic Development (CAD) manages quality assurance systems for the University of Botswana, CAD itself is has a superior capacity compared to TEC in managing quality and standards for the University. The University is continuing to form new programmes without seeking TEC's approval. It remains a question whether TEC will ultimately take control of the whole tertiary education systems in Botswana, otherwise the mandate of the TEC might need to be re-visited.

#### *3.2 Accreditation of programmes from Government institutions*

Taking over the Colleges of Educations, Institutes of Health Sciences, and Vocational Technical Colleges by TEC is proving to be a slow process. The take-over was recommended by the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 but still, eight years after establishment of the TEC, the take-over is yet to take effect.

##### *3.2.1 Accreditation dilemma*

The Colleges of Education, Health Sciences and Technical Colleges are affiliated to the University of Botswana. As the affiliating institution, the University through its CAD is responsible for quality assurance of programmes at these institutions; funding, facilities and general administration of the Colleges remain responsibilities of the

Ministries of Education and Health. Being Government institutions, the Colleges operate under a centralized policy implementation system such that they, as Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) put it, have their autonomy restricted. The Colleges are not responsive to change in knowledge and labour markets and economic development. They have under-qualified staff and inadequate facilities; deficiencies that must be rectified if TEC was to take them over, but since they are administered by Government, it might be a while before the deficiencies are rectified, hence failure by TEC to take over and their continued affiliation with the University of Botswana.

### 3.3 Accreditation of programmes from private institutions

Accreditation of programmes from private institutions is on-going. The TEC has registered all private institutions that offer diploma and degree programmes. Accreditation panels have been deployed to assess institutions for compliance with TEC requirements in virtues of facilities, staffing, quality assurance, and impact of the programmes.

#### 3.3.1 Accreditation dilemma

Accrediting private institution is an area where TEC continues to meet the most complex dilemmas. Most of the private institutions serve as satellite campuses for international university outside Botswana. The universities claim to be offering programmes that were accredited to accrediting bodies at the universities' places of origin hence not easy for the local private institutions to tailor such programmes to suit local situation. Another concern that comes from the institutions themselves is that, while the TEC is scrutinising their programs for quality and standards for possibility of accreditation, other cross-border institutions are offering unaccredited on-line, and distance learning programmes to local candidates. The Tertiary Education Council reported that virtual programmes are a serious problem to them because people enrol in them privately online so it is difficult to keep track of such programmes, hence a high possibility of them being substandard.

## 4. Conclusion

The study revealed administrative hiccups to the accreditation process that include; long-established institution claiming to have their own quality assurance procedures; some programmes being purchased from external institutions which have their own accreditation systems; on-line and distance education programmes that are also accredited to cross-border institutions. It is recommended that the Government of Botswana must strengthen the Tertiary Education Council by giving it capacity grow beyond its current status hence assume full control of tertiary education in the Country. At the moment, the Council falls short in capacity to manage programmes of the more established university system in the Country.

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