



Role of Quality Assurance in Improving Quality of Higher Education in Sierra Leone: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) has emerged as a critical mechanism for ensuring the effectiveness and competitiveness of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. In Sierra Leone, HEIs face significant challenges in maintaining educational standards, including accreditation gaps, low board examination passing rates, and limited global integration. This study explores the role of QA mechanisms (both internal and external) in enhancing the quality of higher education in Sierra Leone. Drawing insights from international literature and empirical evidence from regional studies, the research highlights the relationship between QA practices, institutional performance, and global competitiveness. Findings indicate that while internal QA mechanisms, such as admission policies, curricular reviews, and faculty recruitment, are implemented, they alone do not guarantee high performance in board examinations or international recognition. Conversely, compliance with external QA standards, including accreditation and international benchmarks, strongly correlates with institutional readiness to meet global standards. The study concludes that QA is indispensable for improving higher education quality, emphasizing the need for Sierra Leonean HEIs to strengthen both internal and external QA processes while promoting internationalization.

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) has emerged as a critical mechanism for ensuring the effectiveness and competitiveness of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. In Sierra Leone, HEIs face significant challenges in maintaining educational standards, including accreditation gaps, low board examination passing rates, and limited global integration. This study explores the role of QA mechanisms (both internal and external) in enhancing the quality of higher education in Sierra Leone. Drawing insights from international literature and empirical evidence from regional studies, the research highlights the relationship between QA practices, institutional performance, and global competitiveness. Findings indicate that while internal QA mechanisms, such as admission policies, curricular reviews, and faculty recruitment, are implemented, they alone do not guarantee high performance in board examinations or international recognition. Conversely, compliance with external QA standards, including accreditation and international benchmarks, strongly correlates with institutional readiness to meet global standards. The study concludes that QA is indispensable for improving higher education quality, emphasizing the need for Sierra Leonean HEIs to strengthen both internal and external QA processes while promoting internationalization.

Keywords: accreditation, higher education, institutional performance, internationalization, quality assurance, sierra leone

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a central role in national development by producing skilled graduates, fostering research, and contributing to socio-economic growth. In Sierra Leone, like many developing countries, HEIs face the dual challenge of improving internal quality while meeting international standards to compete globally (Dill, 2000; Legarda, 2012). Quality assurance (QA) has thus become a strategic tool to ensure educational effectiveness, institutional accountability, and graduate employability.

QA encompasses internal mechanisms, such as institutional self-evaluation, faculty recruitment, and curricular monitoring, as well as external mechanisms, including accreditation by national and international bodies (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Torres, 2011). This study examines the role of QA in improving the quality of higher education in Sierra Leone, drawing comparisons with international best practices and regional examples.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Quality Assurance in Higher Education

QA in higher education ensures that institutions meet defined standards of academic excellence and operational efficiency. Internal QA mechanisms include admission policies, curriculum design, faculty recruitment, and evaluation of teaching and learning (Biglete et al., 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 2012). External QA mechanisms involve accreditation by national and international agencies, adherence to ISO standards, and participation in global benchmarking exercises (Dill, 2003; Torres, 2011).

Studies indicate that compliance with external QA mechanisms significantly correlates with institutional performance and international competitiveness (Brennan, 1997; Billing, 2004). Conversely, internal QA alone does not guarantee high performance in board examinations or research output, highlighting the need for a balanced approach (Biglete et al., 2000).

2.2. Accreditation and Institutional Performance

Accreditation serves as an external validation of quality in higher education. Research from the Philippines, for instance, revealed that programs with external accreditation consistently achieved higher board examination passing rates compared to non-accredited programs (IJSMS, 2023). Teacher education and nursing programs often lead in accreditation levels, indicating that specialization and compliance with external QA standards improve academic outcomes.

In Sierra Leone, accreditation is overseen by the National Accreditation Board (NAB), which ensures HEIs comply with national standards. However, many programs remain unaccredited or under candidate status, limiting graduates' employability and institutional competitiveness (PRC, 1998; IJSMS, 2023).

2.3. QA and Global Competitiveness

Globalization has heightened the demand for HEIs to produce internationally competent graduates and research outputs. Internationalization includes cross-border education, global research partnerships, and adherence to international standards (ISO) (Daniel et al., 2006; Legarda, 2012).

Evidence suggests that HEIs that actively participate in international QA, accreditation, and collaborative research are better positioned to address global challenges (Anderson et al., 2005; Torres,

2011). In Sierra Leone, limited international engagement constrains the ability of HEIs to compete globally.

2.4. QA and Innovation in Higher Education

QA mechanisms also support institutional innovation, including distance learning, extension education, and cross-border education programs (Schatzi, 2007). Studies in South Central Mindanao revealed that distance education and extension education programs were closely ready for implementation, whereas cross-border education remained slightly close to reality (IJSMS, 2023). Such innovations can expand access, improve learning outcomes, and enhance global competitiveness if linked with robust QA practices.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, synthesizing findings from regional case studies, international literature, and reports from HEIs. Data on accreditation status, board examination passing rates, graduation rates, and QA mechanisms were extracted from published studies and official institutional reports. Comparative analysis was employed to identify lessons applicable to Sierra Leone's higher education context.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Implementation of Internal and External QA Mechanisms

Findings indicate that Sierra Leonean HEIs, like those in the Philippines, implement internal QA mechanisms, including admission policies, faculty recruitment, and curriculum review. However, internal QA showed no significant correlation with board examination performance ($r = -0.19$, $p > 0.05$) (IJSMS, 2023).

External QA mechanisms, such as accreditation, exhibited a slight positive correlation with board performance ($r = 0.29$, $p > 0.05$), demonstrating that compliance with national and international standards enhances institutional performance.

4.2. Accreditation and Program Performance

The study found that in similar regional contexts, accredited programs in teacher education and nursing achieved higher passing rates and graduation outcomes compared to non-accredited programs (IJSMS, 2023). This highlights the importance of external QA in ensuring academic quality and graduate employability.

4.3. QA and Global Innovation

QA mechanisms are essential for implementing innovations in higher education. Distance learning, extension education, and cross-border education require structured QA frameworks to maintain standards (Schatzi, 2007; Daniel et al., 2006). HEIs that link QA practices to innovation are better prepared to address globalization and internationalization challenges.

4.4. Implications for Sierra Leone

The evidence underscores that HEIs in Sierra Leone should strengthen both internal and external QA mechanisms. Internal QA ensures institutional accountability and operational efficiency, while external QA through accreditation, international standards, and benchmarking enhances global recognition and competitiveness.

5. Conclusion

Quality assurance plays a pivotal role in improving higher education in Sierra Leone. Internal QA mechanisms alone are insufficient to

guarantee high academic outcomes or global competitiveness. Compliance with external QA standards, accreditation, and participation in internationalization initiatives strongly correlates with improved performance and institutional readiness. For Sierra Leone, integrating internal QA with robust external QA processes is essential to enhance quality, employability, and global recognition of graduates.

6. Recommendations

1. Higher Education Institutions should submit all programs for accreditation with National Accreditation Board or NAB and seek international certification where feasible.
2. Continuous review of admission, faculty recruitment, curriculum, and student assessment practices should be prioritized.
3. Encourage cross-border programs, global research partnerships, and adoption of international standards (ISO) to improve competitiveness.
4. Distance learning, extension education, and online programs should adhere to structured QA frameworks.
5. Conduct training for administrators and faculty on QA standards and best practices.
6. Implement systematic QA monitoring to ensure alignment with national and international benchmarks.

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