



THE INFLUENCE OF LEARNING PRACTICES ON QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS IN SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN UGANDA

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Abstract:

Quality assurance has always been an integral part of university education. Modern quality assurance mechanisms in Ugandan universities began with the establishment of the national quality assurance framework by the national council for higher education in 2006. Although learners are the reason for the existence of university education, in Uganda there was persistent concern about the learning practices of students and outcomes of their learning. This study established the influence of learning practices on quality assurance mechanisms (QAMs) in selected universities in Uganda, specifically focusing on the extent to which the learning orientation of students and competencies of the learners reflected QAMs. A study based on systems theory adopted the pragmatic paradigm and the cross-sectional survey design. Disproportionate stratified random sampling was employed to reach 300 members of the faculty and students who responded to questionnaires. While 47 and 20 students and managers respectively were interviewed. Descriptive statistics and chi-square were used to analyze the data collected, corroborated with qualitative data. The results demonstrated a positive significant relationship between learning practices and QAMs. The study concluded that learning practices have significantly affected QAMs. It was recommended that the universities sampled should review their programs to ensure the full involvement of learners and the development of both hard and soft skills.

Keywords: learning practices, quality assurance mechanisms, selected universities, Uganda

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1. Introduction

According to Strydom et al., (1997), in the past Quality Assurance Mechanisms (QAMs) in universities were part of the required culture of academic freedom and independence of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Brennan and Shah (2000) noted that in the early days, few and brilliant learners went through the path of education to the university with minimal challenges to quality assurance. Ullah (2005) reported that during this period many HEIs offered poor-quality services and had low-quality products due to inadequate finances, low qualification of the teaching staff associated with a lack of professionalism. Mamdani (2007) observed that towards the end of 20th century, a lot of African universities experienced a marked fall in the quality of education due to among others privatization of university education, rising enrolment and low funding. Consequently, many countries established quality assurance agencies in order to promote QAMs (Shaban, et al., 2014). In Uganda, QAMs have been in existence since the opening of Makerere Technical College in 1922. By 1949, the technical college became a constituent college of University of London and adopted the QAMs of the university. However, with the rise in demand for Higher Education (HE) in the country there was a marked increase in the number of government and private universities associated with a sharp rise in enrolment, poor funding, and poor quality of learning facilities that existed since the colonial days (Government white paper, 2008) all creating a lot of challenges for quality assurance. This led to the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Uganda to promote QA by regulating the new HE providers (Materu & Righeti, 2010).

This investigation is based on the systems theory which looks at universities as HEIs that rely on inputs that are processed and the products (graduates and services) released into the environment. The study is premised on the argument that the procurement of quality inputs is a prerequisite for the efficient and effective implementation of QAMs in universities. Cheng and Tam (1997) noted that if an HEI is considered to be a system, the focus of QAMs should be on the evaluation of the inputs, their transformation and the products. The main inputs in universities are human resources (administrators, the faculty and students) and physical resources (finances and infrastructure). The curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment are the processes employed to transform the inputs into products. The institutional environment influences the application of QAMs in universities (Kansay, 2012). Universities have both an internal environment made up of administrators, the faculty and students as well as an external environment that includes the government, regulators, employers and parents. According to Kansay (2012), the core of QAMs lies in educational processes. He noted that poor quality learning and assessment practices among others present a problem to mechanisms of QA at universities. The focus of this inquiry is on the influence of learning practices on QAMs in universities. This is derived from the argument that learners are the reason for the existence of university education. Teaching has a derived demand since it is aimed at higher-quality student learning (Prosser, 2013). Sajjab (2010,

p. 29) asserted that *“teaching and learning are the two sides of a coin”* and *“the most effective criterion to measure quality teaching is the amount of learning that occurs”*. According to Tam (2002) lifelong learning is the reason for the existence of universities and suggested that it should be an area of concern over any efforts made for QA.

In the context of this study, learning practices are the activities in which the learners are involved, activities of the academic staff and administrators that have a bearing on student learning reflecting the extent to which QAMs are maintained. Some of the activities are the level of learners' motivation and attitude to learning, the effectiveness of students' assessment and empowerment as well as the availability of learning facilities. In a study done by Kuh et al., (2010) they discovered that the time and energy learners invest in educationally meaningful activities is a function of the level of academic challenges experienced, enriching educational experiences provided, active and collaborative learning presented, student-faculty interaction and supportive campus environment. Quality assurance mechanisms are the techniques and procedures for efficient and effective implementation of internal measures with an aim to maintain and improve the quality of university education reflected in the development of various competencies by learners (Kadhila, 2012)

Formal QAMs in Ugandan universities started with the establishment of the NCHE by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) in 2001. The NCHE published the National Quality Assurance Framework (NQAF) in 2006 to unite the council together with HEIs in order to achieve and enhance QA in the universities in Uganda (NCHE, 2008). The NQAF has a regulatory part at the national level and the institutional component level at each university. The latter makes HEIs responsible for QA. Section 3.0 of the NQAF requires each higher education institution to establish a quality assurance unit or directorate to develop quality control procedures such as regular review of programs, learning practices, teaching practices and assessment. The mechanisms outlined by section 3.0 to assure quality at the universities are; i) governance at the university, ii) quality of teaching and learning, iii) quality of teaching staff, iv) adequacy of educational infrastructure, v) research and publications, vi) the quality of products, vii) financial management at the university, viii) university and the community. The focus of this paper is on aspects of the second, third, fourth and sixth mechanisms of QA at each university. The QAMs listed above have not sufficiently been implemented by universities in Uganda. The NCHE (2010) points out that Uganda's universities are associated with problems of poor-quality teaching staff, poor curriculum, and inadequate learning facilities. The space-to-learner ratio of libraries, lecture rooms, and laboratories in many universities is below the benchmarks of QA set by the NQAF. For instance, Acanga (2013) reported a drop in library space across universities from 0.28m² to 0.13m² below the set standards of NCHE.

2. Statement of the Problem

Literature shows that in the globe, QA is a priority in university education. Quality assurance mechanisms in university education are reflected in the levels of knowledge and professional competency of students. Accordingly, it is essential to develop QAMs so as to offer better learning services at universities (Materu, 2007). Long, et al., (2000) suggested that formal QA mechanisms are critical and necessary to raise the standards of learning in HEIs. In the Ugandan context where knowledge and competencies are less valued by many HE learners, it is quite hard to expect the design and successful implementation of QAMs. Thus, there is continued dissatisfaction with some of the products of Uganda's university sector. A lot of the graduates are poorly prepared for the job market and are often criticized for failure to display the type of knowledge, initiative, maturity and capacity to contribute to national development (Agaba, 2014). This is a reflection of insufficient learning and the failure to maintain QAMs. Efforts students make for learning is the most important way for them to acquire knowledge and skills. Giordon (2010) observes that learning is an individual action that confronts learners with the risk of going to an unknown place in the end. For most of the teaching staff, good students are those who are eager to learn with positive attitudes towards learning. Going by the above arguments and observations, there seemed to be a gap in the learning practices of students in Ugandan universities with no clear effects on QAMs. This study, therefore, set out to establish the influence of learning practices on quality assurance mechanisms in selected universities in Uganda.

2.1 Study Objectives

The general objective of the study was to examine the extent to which learning practices influence quality assurance mechanisms in selected universities in Uganda with a specific interest in the learning orientation of students and the extent to which learners are able to develop various competencies.

3. Literature Review

A sizeable number of scholars in QA at HE shares the opinion of making student learning take a central position in the QA mechanisms of HEIs. Tam (2002) notes that the approach to best learning should be the focus of any interest on QA. He summarized by saying that QA practices in universities should be analyzed by focusing on facilities and critical processes that affect the quality of learning. Barnett (1992) noted that at all levels concern on QA should be aimed at enhancing learning. Astin (1993) argued that perfections in HEIs should be quantified in reference to the ways and levels of learning achieved by students.

Student learning refers to all the competencies obtained by learners due to their participation in educational processes. For instance, the level of both soft and hard skills as well as knowledge attained by learners due to their participation in courses (Dill, 2003).

Barnett (1992), Dill (1995) and Harvey (1995) indicated that the interest in students' experiences is due to the observations of many scholars on the relevance of competencies gained by the learners as well as the contribution of the learners themselves in the level of knowledge/skills obtained. In an inquiry in Uganda, Nabaho et al. (2017) were of the view that learners should gain soft skills and perfect individual abilities at the time of learning in universities. According to academics, quality education is about the production of a graduate with multiple competencies (Nabaho, et al., 2017).

Pond (1964) in a study of motivation and study habits among Australian students noted that well-composed students can adopt ways to reduce challenges faced in their learning to perform better. While in Ghana, Powell (1969) found a significant relationship between motivation and better learning. In Uganda, Bunjo (1983) and Osire (1983) confirmed the importance of motivation for academic success in geography and mathematics among primary seven pupils' respectively. In support of these findings, the researcher argues that high motivation is vital for success in academics. Students with a lazy character are not keen to learn as they always seem to be busy with non-academic activities.

Muller and Funnel (1992) argued that students in HEIs should be fully engaged to have a lot of input in the learning process by taking responsibility for establishing, supplying and assessing the products. For successful QAMs in HEIs, students have to be at the center of the practices by which learning is assessed. But in practice, the level of student involvement is quite low in Ugandan universities. This study sought to establish how this influenced QAMs in the selected universities. Institutions of HE are also at the center of empowering learners by enabling participants to influence their personal education and change. Empowering learners involves participation in making choices that influence changes in them. Muller and Funnel (1992) argue that to a great extent, the participants must take responsibility for the education process and it is their duty to influence the style and method of delivering knowledge. Wiggins (1998) argues that failing to empower students is dangerous because they may not develop critical thinking, a crucial determinant in the process of acquiring knowledge *"when a student does increasingly better at what he/she is doing such an individual is also increasingly less likely to question what he/she knows"* (p.19). He further argues that the faculty has the duty to intellectually engage learners.

Wiggins notes that developing critical thinking means that students have to know how to support their arguments, recognize and provide better assignments, do self-assessments, create a technique of learning, ask questions, analyze approaches, accept the lack of knowledge on certain elements to be learned and be self-critical. Stensaker et al., (2007) noted that the purpose of preparing students to get a bachelor's degree is to change the learners *"from adolescents with school-type knowledge into adults ready to enter society and the labor market at the highest level of competencies available"* (p.7). Empowering students in HEIs among others involves the consumer/client in setting standards, endorsing practices and specifying curricula. This requires the creation of a conducive atmosphere for

learning to enable the full engagement and commitment of the participants in their learning and in the QAMs.

Scholars such as Chickering and Gamson (1987) as well as Biggs (1999) argued that participants in HEIs learn more if they are fully engaged in the learning process. This means effective learning is the outcome of learners' engagement in the tasks to be learned. Similarly, Davis and Murrell (1994) observed that the level of students' learning is directly linked to the energy they put into their learning. The weight participants give to learning has a great influence on the techniques adopted for learning. In studying the linkage between learners' conceptions of learning and academic performance, Mclean (2001) found a relationship between conceptions and academic success; learners with dynamic conceptions of learning, as opposed to reproducing, were discovered to have better academic performance.

Entwistle and Tait (1990) discovered that learners' orientation to knowledge is seen in their techniques of learning. To Trigwell and Prosser (2004) students who attach value to a facilitative approach to teaching experience higher quality learning. This is because students with active beliefs about learning easily adopt self-directed learning, collaborative learning and project-based learning.

3. Methodology

The study is based on a descriptive survey research design under the mixed methods approach. This enabled the integration of the results and the drawing of conclusions using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study targeted members of management, the academic staff and students as well as HE administrators from NCHE and Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES). Universities in the country were stratified into public and private universities. Accordingly, three public and three private universities established before 2006 were disproportionately sampled to participate in the study. This is because they were expected to have all the benchmarks to maintain QAMs. One hundred eighty students and 120 academic staff members were randomly selected to respond to questionnaires. Forty-seven conveniently sampled students participated in focus group discussions. Twenty administrators, particularly those directly concerned with matters of QA in HE were purposively sampled from the selected universities, NCHE and MOES to participate in personal interviews. The validity of the research instruments was established by the use of the expert judgment technique of Gay (1996). A pilot study run on a few students and faculty from non-participating universities was useful to establish the reliability of the instruments. The quantitative data were analyzed by employing descriptive statistics in the form of frequency tables and percentages. While regressive statistics (X^2) was used to interpret the findings. In order to establish the strength of the influence of learning practices on quality assurance mechanisms, tests of significance performed at the probability level of $p < 0.05$ were critical.

4. Results

The findings are based on the respondents' opinions on the influence learning practices had on QAMs. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, presented, analyzed and interpreted.

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| Respondents | Academic staff | 120 | 40 |
| | Students | 180 | 60 |
| Gender | Male | 188 | 62.7 |
| | Female | 112 | 37.3 |
| Level of education of the teaching staff | Diploma | 3 | 2.5 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 20 | 16.7 |
| | PGD | 3 | 2.5 |
| | Master's degree | 77 | 64.2 |
| | PhD | 17 | 14.2 |
| Title of academic staff members | Teaching assistant | 20 | 16.7 |
| | Assistant lecturer | 30 | 25 |
| | Lecturer | 51 | 42.5 |
| | Senior lecturer | 17 | 14.2 |
| | Associate professor | 1 | 0.8 |
| | Professor | 1 | 0.8 |
| Number of years of service at the university | 1-5 | 40 | 33.3 |
| | 6-10 | 19 | 15.8 |
| | 11-15 | 18 | 15 |
| | 16-20 | 21 | 17.5 |
| | 20+ | 22 | 18.3 |
| Year of study of students | 2 nd | 71 | 39.4 |
| | 3 rd | 45 | 25 |
| | 4 th | 36 | 20 |
| | 5 th | 28 | 15.6 |
| Age bracket of students | 20-25 | 65 | 36.1 |
| | 26-30 | 67 | 37.2 |
| | 31+ | 48 | 26.7 |

Source: Primary data.

Quantitative data on views and perceptions of 300 participants sampled from 6 universities were analyzed using SPSS 18 computer software. The response rate was 100% for the quantitative data since all 300 questionnaires were returned. Forty percent of the respondents were academics and 60% were students. Thus, the disproportionate stratified random sampling method was employed in the study. Over seventy eight percent of managers responded to individual interviews and 59% of students were involved in FGDs. The majority of the respondents were males while 37.3% of them were females suggesting a gender imbalance in the selected universities. Only 14.2% of the teaching staff had PhDs. Accordingly, 14.2% of the academics were senior lecturers and

0.8% each reached the levels of associate professor and professor respectively. This, suggests that most of the academic staffs in the selected universities were of lower ranks with serious implications for the undertaking of QAMs during teaching and learning practices. Over 33% of the faculty members from the selected universities had served between 1-5 years. This suggests less experience in a number of activities in the universities such as ensuring QAMs during the process of learning. Thirty-nine percent of the students were in 2nd year, 25% in 3rd year, 20% in 4th year and 15.6% in 5th year, an indication that they had some experience of how learning practices influenced QAMs in the sampled universities. Most of the students were in the age bracket of 26-30, suggesting maturity in responding to the items of inquiry.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics on Learning Orientation of Students to Enhance Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Table 2: Responses from academic staff and students
 on how learning is affected by the following orientations

| Learning orientations | Responses from academic staff | | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| | Not affected | | Not sure | | Affected | |
| | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| Motivation to learn | 28 | 23.3 | 20 | 16.7 | 72 | 60 |
| Self-confidence to learn | 24 | 20 | 24 | 20 | 72 | 60 |
| Attitude towards their fields of study for quality learning | 31 | 25.8 | 22 | 18.3 | 67 | 55.8 |
| Interest towards the course(s) you teach for quality learning | 21 | 17.5 | 14 | 11.7 | 82 | 70.8 |
| Academic preparedness to learn | 28 | 23.4 | 14 | 11.7 | 78 | 65 |
| Value orientation towards quality learning | 27 | 22.5 | 19 | 15.8 | 74 | 61.7 |
| | Responses from students | | | | | |
| Motivation for learning | 63 | 35 | 10 | 5.6 | 107 | 59.5 |
| Level of self-confidence in learning | 36 | 20 | 22 | 12.2 | 122 | 67.7 |
| Attitude towards the current field of study | 51 | 28.3 | 1 | 0.6 | 128 | 71.1 |
| Interest towards the course (s) you have attended | 61 | 33.9 | 4 | 2.2 | 115 | 63.9 |
| Levels of engagement in the courses you have taken | 61 | 33.9 | 8 | 4.4 | 111 | 61.7 |
| Appropriateness of workload assigned to you | 35 | 19.4 | 16 | 8.9 | 129 | 71.6 |

Source: Field data.

In Table 2 a high percentage of the faculty and students were of the opinion that students are motivated to learn. However, a higher percentage (35%) of the learners rated their motivation to learn as poor compared to only 23.3% of the academics. A few of the learners and academic staff members were not sure of the motivation levels of students to learn. The results suggest that although many students are motivated to learn, a good number are not motivated enough. The low motivation to learn might be a reflection of being forced to go for a university education and general laziness. Interview data from students and members of management from the selected universities showed a mixed picture of students' motivation to learn. Some of the practices mentioned by interviewees that indicated students' motivation to learn included; frequent attendance of lectures,

timely submission of assignments, revision of lecture notes and independent research to learn beyond what the teaching staff give.

The interviewees identified the practices of absenteeism from lectures, use of “mercenaries” to do assignments, tests, and exams, late or none submission of assignments, and substance and social media abuse as aspects that showed a lack of motivation to learn by some students. One of the manager interviewees from Private University One (PR1) reported that “*a student missed lectures for one month and got a retake on top of retakes he had*”. This shows that individual students in universities have different levels of motivation to learn. Accordingly, learning achievement and effectiveness vary among students. The inner drive in a student to learn is reflected in his/her willingness to learn. Perhaps some students are less motivated to learn due to the few benefits expected from their university education. This negatively influences the quality of their learning and QA mechanisms in general in university education.

Sixty percent of the faculty and a higher percentage of students observed that the degree of contentment of students in learning is quite good. Twenty percent of both the teaching staff and students had a contrary view. A few of the respondents were not sure. The data suggests that most of the students in the selected universities were self-confident in learning with the likelihood of improving QA mechanisms in their learning. The interviewees mentioned practices such as class presentations and approaching lecturers in areas of doubt as ways through which students displayed confidence in learning. However, some respondents noted that a number of students do not participate fully in discussions and fail in presentations partly due to a lack of self-confidence. A lot of research supports the notion that believing in one’s ability to do something enhances the chances of success. Therefore, a self-confident student is more likely to be more optimistic and interested in learning. On the other hand, a lack of self-confidence dampens the motivation to learn.

Slightly above half of the teaching staff and a great percentage of students were of the opinion that the attitude of students towards their fields of study was good. However, 28.8% of the academic staff as well as 28.3% of the students observed that students had a poor attitude towards their fields of study. Only a single student had no opinion compared to 18.3% of the academics. The findings suggest that learners in the sampled institutions to a greater extent had positive attitudes towards their fields of study for quality learning. Data from interviews indicate that students and managers from the universities of the study were of the opinion that students generally had a good attitude to learn. Success in learning requires eagerness on the side of students to learn and to develop a positive attitude towards learning. Learning is an individual action; hence a positive attitude towards learning by each and every student is a step to enhance quality learning and quality assurance mechanisms.

The data in Table 2 above shows a great majority of academic staff and students subscribed to the view that students have a high interest towards the course(s) attended. But a much higher percentage (33.9%) of the students noted that they were not interested in the courses they are offering compared to only 17.5% of the academic staff. Four

students and fourteen of the academic staff had no opinion. The findings suggest that much as a good number of academic staff members believed students were interested in courses they were undertaking, a sizable number of students were not interested in the course(s) they were doing. This raises a lot of doubts about the quality of their learning. From the interview data, there was evidence of a lack of interest in learning in general terms on the part of some students. For instance, an interviewee from MOES was of the opinion that students in Ugandan universities have a low commitment to learning. This seems to indicate that many students in Ugandan universities were either forced to do certain courses or have lost the direction of why they are in the universities. This presents a threat to the quality of their learning as well as quality assurance mechanisms.

The data indicates that many members of the faculty (65%) were of the view that the academic preparedness of students affected their learning and a few of the faculty members (23.4%) had a contrary view. Another fourteen of them were not sure. The results seem to show that the level of students' academic preparedness to learn contributes towards their learning in the sampled universities. This is not in agreement with the interview data. There were reports of some students with lazy characters performing weakly in exams with others caught cheating in exams. This seems to indicate that some learners in the selected universities were not prepared enough for rigorous university studies. The weak academic background of some learners may have negative implications on their achievements and the standards of their learning in universities. The government policy of two principles passes for university admission regardless of the quality of the grades may be having a negative effect on the quality of learning. Admitting students with low grades and sending them direct to bachelor's degree courses poses a great problem to the HEIs in trying to assure the quality of learning and maintenance of quality assurance mechanisms.

The results indicated that the majority of the academic staff (61.7%) were of the opinion that students' value orientation towards quality learning is good. But 22.5% of the academic staff thought students do not have a value orientation towards quality learning. Yet 15.8% were not sure. The findings suggest that there is a high-value orientation towards quality learning among students in the universities of this study. Students who value quality learning normally focus more on learning with much more commitment in searching for new knowledge, development of new skills and other competencies. These reflect the upholding of quality assurance mechanisms.

In Table 2, the majority of students (61.7%) observed that the level of their engagement in courses undertaken is quite good but a third of the students (33.5%) were not satisfied. Only eight of them were not sure. This seems to show that learners from the sampled universities are quite engaged in the courses offered for effective learning. Across the selected universities interview results showed that the management and the academic staff had ways to engage students in their learning. The implementation of the policy of at least 75% attendance of lectures by learners before sitting for the final exams in all course units in a semester ensured class attendance. In addition, course unit tests and assignments were used to keep students engaged in their learning. In this regard one

of the student interviewees from PR1 said; *“class presentations by students help students to understand better than when a lecturer teaches since students are able to criticize and supplement the information presented”*. Another student from Public University One (PU1) reported that *“lecturers give tasks to students and let them come up with questionnaires to go to the field and experience the practice of independent research”*. All these practices show the educationally purposive engagement of students which is expected to lead to a good outcome on the quality of their learning. But generally, there is a big obstacle of low levels of engagement and commitment among learners as the universities try to implement quality assurance mechanisms.

The information in Table 2 indicates a large number of students (71.6%) were satisfied with the appropriateness of the workload assigned to them. Few of them (19.4%) were dissatisfied and sixteen students had no opinion. The results seem to show that the workload given to students in the selected universities is appropriate to make the quality of their learning greater. For many university learners, the workload they receive from the faculty is a critical factor in influencing their involvement in programs of study.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics on the Levels of Competencies Gained by Students to Enhance Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Table 3: Responses from academic staff and students on the competencies gained by students from the universities

| Competencies attained | Responses from the academic staff and students | | | | | |
|---|--|------|----------|------|----------------|------|
| | Poor/dissatisfied | | Not sure | | Good/satisfied | |
| | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| Subject matter knowledge | 54 | 18 | 44 | 14.7 | 202 | 67.3 |
| Problem-solving skills | 41 | 13.7 | 31 | 10.3 | 228 | 76 |
| Analytical/critical thinking skills | 103 | 34.3 | 22 | 7.3 | 175 | 58.4 |
| Practical skills | 92 | 30.7 | 21 | 7 | 187 | 62.4 |
| Communication skills | 98 | 32.7 | 27 | 9 | 175 | 58.4 |
| Research ability | 99 | 33 | 35 | 11.7 | 166 | 55.3 |
| Employability of graduates | 92 | 30.7 | 22 | 7.3 | 186 | 62 |
| Teamwork skills | 82 | 27.4 | 29 | 9.7 | 189 | 63 |
| Overall preparation of students for professional career | 102 | 34 | 26 | 8.7 | 172 | 57.3 |

Source: Field data.

Data in Table 3 shows most of the respondents were satisfied with the subject matter knowledge of the students. Eighteen percent of them were not satisfied. The rest were undecided. The data seems to indicate that the subject matter knowledge of the students in the sampled universities is adequate. Analyses of the interview data show that interviewees were in agreement with the above findings. In this regard, a manager from MOES had this to say *“the education system in Uganda’s higher education is knowledge based but not skills based especially in the humanities where it is exams oriented and inadequacy of knowledge is reflected when some students get retakes”*. However, some of the existing modes

of knowledge delivery in the sampled universities seem not to encourage students to generate knowledge. Under such circumstances what is more important is to reinforce students' learning to learn at universities. Learning to learn is being able to produce new knowledge/skills for new situations.

A good number of the participants in this study observed that students in the selected universities had good problem-solving skills. About fourteen percent of them were not satisfied and 10.3% of the respondents were not sure. This suggests that most of the students in the sampled universities are able to gain problem-solving skills. The theoretical nature of HE provided in the universities that participated in this inquiry seemed not to reflect the full utilization of QA mechanisms. For instance, the high level of graduate unemployment in Uganda is indicative of the failure to solve problems by students. The high rate of unemployment in Uganda is partly a result of the low competencies of the products universities produce in terms of levels of knowledge and skills required in jobs.

Most respondents (58.4%) were satisfied with the analytical/critical thinking skills of the students in the sampled universities. More than one-third of the respondents (34.3%) were of the view that students from the sampled universities have poor analytical/critical thinking skills leaving a few undecided. The findings indicate that not all the students from the selected universities are able to develop analytical/critical thinking skills. For instance, an interviewee from MOES was of the opinion that the current education system in Uganda does not promote scholarship. He further observed that learners are pumped with knowledge right from primary up to the university without developing skills for generating knowledge and summarized by saying that there are no critical thinkers who are independent enough. Critical thinking is an essential skill students in Ugandan universities require to resolve learning challenges that contribute to better learning.

The data in Table 3 reveals that most of the respondents were satisfied with the development of practical skills among students. But 30.7% of the respondents were unsatisfied, while the remaining 7% expressed no opinion. This suggests a lot of the students from the selected universities are able to develop practical skills. One interviewee from MOES observed that the science courses are more practical than the humanities. He noted that *"in PU1 the college of health sciences does very well in teaching because of their practical teaching. All the medical-related courses are practical, small group works are given and the curriculum and numbers aid this. The humanities and education are mostly lecture-based due to large numbers. A lot of handouts are given, and some go unexplained"*. However, a student interviewee from PU1 noted that some practical courses are not covered in a practical way but in a more theoretical way. This is in line with the dissatisfaction expressed by a manager from Public University 2 (PU2). He said; *"theoretical teaching is well done by lecturers, the challenge is practical teaching where there are no opportunities to take students for relevant practical learning"*. This indicates that quality assurance mechanisms are not fully enhanced. This calls for universities to identify areas for practical learning that are hands-on. Currently, the emphasis of the Uganda

government is on a practical education system that produces graduates with practical skills. Practical knowledge enhances a detailed knowledge of concepts through practical and personal experience.

Most of the respondents were satisfied with the communication skills of students. About a third of the respondents were of the view that students have poor communication skills. The rest (9%) of the respondents were not sure. The indication is that students from the sampled universities on average have developed communication skills. An interviewee from MOES noted that the *“soft skills of many students in Ugandan universities are not well developed, they lack skills of assertiveness and communication”*. This requires HEIs to put more emphasis on the development of soft skills of students. Good communication skills in particular are vital in presentations, discussions and research which are important to enhance the quality of learning and quality assurance mechanisms.

Over half of the respondents observed that the research abilities of students are good. But a third of them were not satisfied. While 11.7% of the respondents were not sure. These results seem to indicate that although many students from the sampled universities have developed skills in research, a lot of them still have poor abilities in doing research. Analyses of the interview data show that students have carried out research at different levels such as reading to answer coursework assignments and to learn beyond what lecturers teach. In addition, some students are able to undertake serious research and publish papers. However, a good number of students are lazy in doing research and hire the services of other people to write for their assignments or simply plagiarize the work of others. In this regard, an interviewee from MOES was of the opinion that *“there are master course works which some students access to copy”*. This explains why a lot of students cannot undertake rigorous studies to fulfill all the requirements of completing a program. Some of the students are forced to hire the services of what they call as *“mercenaries”* to carry out the study. This dilutes the quality of learning of the affected students and quality assurance mechanisms.

A lot of the respondents (62%) were satisfied with the employability of graduates. But 30% of the respondents were of the opinion that the employability of graduates is poor, leaving 7.3% not sure. The results seem to show that to a great extent, students from the sampled universities are able to acquire the necessary requirements for jobs. However, practically there is a very high level of graduate unemployment in Uganda. This is partly an indication of a lack of employable skills in the graduates of the universities. This means that in their subsequent curriculum reviews universities have to seek the views of employers so as to produce people with the relevant competencies required in the employment sector.

The data in Table 3 above shows much of the respondents (63%) were satisfied with the teamwork skills of students. While 27.4% of the respondents observed that the teamwork spirit of students is poor. The remaining few respondents were undecided. The results seem to show that most of the students from the sampled universities are able to develop good teamwork skills. Analyses of interview data show practices such as

giving of group projects and assignments, class presentations, group discussions and sharing of materials as ways to build team spirit. The results demonstrate that academics from the selected universities are able to build teamwork skills among their students. It is critical to building team spirit among university graduates so as to make them become more useful members of the community.

More than half of the participants (57.3%) were satisfied with the overall preparation of students for professional careers in the selected universities of this study. But slightly over a third of the respondents (34%) were unsatisfied. The remaining few were not sure. The results suggest that although many learners from the selected universities have been prepared for overall professional careers a lot more are not fully prepared. Professionalism is a critical requirement in jobs that a university graduate must possess in order to fit well into the sector. Thus, all the HEIs have to ensure that the right conditions for the development of professionalism are made available in order to enhance quality assurance mechanisms.

When the respondents were requested to give their views on practices that enabled and hindered learning in their respective universities, they identified the following enabling practices; provision of learning facilities and equipment, teamwork among the key stakeholders, presence of faculty members who have a cordial relationship with learners, creating a conducive learning environment, frequent curriculum reviews and several methods of assessment employed, monitoring and eliminating activities that disrupt students' learning. A lot of learners also regularly attend lectures and carry out independent research.

Nevertheless, the respondents identified the following as practices that hindered students' learning; the presence of few academic staff members many of whom are part-timers. Involvement of some lecturers in unprofessional practices such as money for marks, sex for marks, absenteeism, less frequent review of students' learning and delays in giving feedback on assessments. Not much provision for the development of practical skills in many university programs associated with the lack of supplies for practical exams. The learning facilities and equipment such as learning aids are inadequate. Some learners attend lectures irregularly, fail to do tests and assignments and concentrate more on nonacademic activities.

The respondents identified the following ways to improve the learning practices to enhance the quality of students' learning; recruit academics in the required numbers with the necessary qualifications followed by staff development, review programs and add a lot of practical content, secure enough learning facilities, equipment and stationery, frequent assessment of the students' level of learning with quick and sufficient feedbacks as well as assessing varied competencies, close supervision of both the academics and learners to make sure that learning practices are taking place and intensify career guidance to students.

3.3 Hypothesis Testing: Learning Practices Do Not Influence Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Selected Universities in Uganda

This was to investigate whether learning practices influenced QA mechanisms in selected universities in Uganda. A chi-square test for both the academics and students had statistically significant results i.e. the chi-square p-value of 0.001 of the academic staff and the chi-square p-value of 0.012 for students are both < the critical p-value of 0.05. This means that learning practices influence QA mechanisms in the selected universities in Uganda. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected.

4. Discussion

Many scholars rate student learning as a core reason for the existence of universities that requires QA. In the opinion of Astin (1993), the best HEIs are assessed by better competencies obtained by students. Tam (2002) observes that sustained improvement in QA to optimize learners' competencies and progress is the major aim of HEIs. The focus of QA mechanisms in HEIs should be to enhance students' learning since quality in HE is linked to student learning (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007).

Studies have shown that learners who are in constant touch with professors learn more and are more satisfied students. In their transformative quality model, Harvey and Knight (1996) explained that students and their teachers should have a transparent learning process based on dialogue between them. Cross (1998) observes that students who are in continuous touch with the faculty members in the lecture rooms and out of the lecture theatres during their years of studying are more contented with their learning experiences and think that they are more knowledgeable/skillful than learners who had fewer hours of contact with the academic staff.

On assessment practices, the results presented a mixed picture of the level of feedback given to learners. The academic staff members who valued prompt feedback worked to improve student learning. According to Chalmers (2008), assessment is a basic requirement to be employed in quality assurance mechanisms to enhance learning since it informs learners about their academic performance. Prompt feedback ensures that the teaching staff are made aware of problems encountered by students in their learning and helps the academics to conduct self-evaluation. Assessments that promote students' continuous involvement improves the quality of learning. However, academic staff practices such as delayed feedback, inconsistent marking and outright lack of marking mentioned by some of the respondents presented a big challenge to QA mechanisms in the universities involved.

The findings revealed that most of the respondents were of the view that there was sustained intellectual stimulation of students in courses offered. This enhances critical thinking among students, a basic prerequisite for innovativeness among learners. But a proportion of participants were of the view that the HE provided in Ugandan universities that is exam-driven does not encourage critical thinking. This is in agreement with Tiberondwa (1998) when he noted that there is a tendency of many postgraduate students

to expect their supervisor(s) to identify research topics for them, but basically, the role of a supervisor is to help a student develop into an academic researcher in his/her own area.

It was revealed that the academic preparedness of some students admitted to the selected universities presented a threat to quality assurance mechanisms. The results showed that there are some students who are incompetent, lazy and not keen to learn. According to World Bank (1994), when the quality and background of students admitted into a university are poor, academic performance would be poor despite the presence of good lecturers and teaching materials. However, in Uganda, the quality of learning in the universities is to a great extent influenced by students admitted from secondary schools many of whom have gone through universal secondary schools, after going through the universal primary schools where the quality of student learning is generally low. Bunoti (2012) points out that some private universities in Uganda admit students for survival. The repercussions of all these are felt upon the QA mechanisms in universities. Therefore, input sources for admitted students are crucial for universities to maintain quality learning.

The results indicated that there are some students with poor attitudes to learning and lack interest in their areas of study. Student attitude is an important factor in learning since it determines students' interest in or disinclination away from learning. Lavin (1965) contends that a positive attitude towards intellectual pursuits had a significant link to success in academics. This was confirmed in Uganda by Tembe (1986) when he did a study on the learning of English. A positive attitude makes students preserve adequate time to concentrate on academic work and where intelligence is not very high it makes a difference since students are responsible for their own learning. The negative attitude of some students in the universities visited reflected in poor attendance of lectures and failure to do course work assignments raised a lot of doubts about the quality of their learning. Thus, the failure to ensure and/or raise the quality of learning among some students should not only be attributed to the lack of support from some faculty members but also to the lack of interest among some students to fully embrace learning, reflecting a big hindrance to the enhancement of quality assurance mechanisms.

6. Conclusion

Based on the study findings it was concluded that learning practices have significantly influenced QA mechanisms in the selected universities. This is because the chi-square test results for the faculty and students had statistically significant results. This meant both the academic staff members and students were in agreement that learning practices influenced quality assurance mechanisms in the selected universities in Uganda. The qualitative data shows practices such as poor attendance of lectures and substance abuse among students as well as insufficient feedback from the faculty have continued to present a threat to QA mechanisms in the selected universities.

6.1 Recommendation

There is a need for the selected universities to introduce relevant and appropriate courses that can produce critical thinkers with the ability to independent action such as an inquiry-based approach. They further need to ensure that there is an integration of hard and soft skills in the subsequent curriculum reviews. The academic staffs have to do a regular assessment of the students' level of learning with quick and adequate feedback as well as assessing various competencies from both hard and soft skills. There is an urgent need for the management to closely supervise the activities of both the academics and learners to ensure the effective implementation of quality assurance mechanisms in the selected universities in Uganda. This should be accompanied by frequent QA meetings among the management, the academic staff and students. This will enable students to express their views about their learning experiences that the authorities can respond to in the most appropriate way.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest on the part of the authors of the article. The report is based on the findings of a PhD thesis of the correspondent author and the co-authors as the research supervisors. This is therefore to confirm that the article is based on factual data and in agreement with the co-authors. The paper is not under review for publication.

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