

Relationship Between Academic Autonomy and Quality Assurance in Kyambogo University

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Abstract

The study was aimed at establishing the relationship academic autonomy and quality assurance at Kyambogo University. The study used an embedded research design with dominant quantitative and minor qualitative approaches. A number of 157 academic staff and 10 administrative staff served as study respondents and participants respectively. Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire and interview guide. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations at univariate level while a bivariate level, Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Linear Regression were used. Qualitative data was thematically analysed. Results revealed that there was a positive significant effect between academic autonomy and quality assurance. Thus, it was concluded that academic autonomy affect quality assurance positively. It was recommended that if quality assurance is to be enhanced in Kyambogo University, the University Council and relevant administrators like university deans do the following; Always allow the university autonomy to determine courses to teach, determine content, assessment procedures without interference from external bodies.

Key words: Academic autonomy, quality assurance

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1. Introduction

The history of quality assurance in African higher education goes back to the founding of first universities in Africa through Bay College in Makerere Technical College 1922 which later turned into a center of Higher Education in East Africa in 1935, Sieraleone 1827, University of Cape Town in 1928, University of Cape Town in 1928, Liberia College 1852, University College of Addis Ababa 1951, University of Darkker 1957; and quality issues in those early days were in the hands governing bodies (Hayward, 2006). The British, French, Portuguese or other systems of quality assurance granted a high degree of institutional autonomy to higher education institutions (Hayward, 2006). Meanwhile, Materu (2007) observed that the growth in enrolments amidst declining budgets in 1980s and 1990's raised pressure on available resources resulting in quality dilemmas.

Salmi (2009) noted that with independence of most African countries in the 1960s, state authority over higher education increased leading to an effect on institutional autonomy and a decline in the quality of higher education. However, this study concentrated more on institutional autonomy. Similarly, Namala et al. (2024) established that quality assurance issues are still impacting on the delivery of university education in most universities at national and regional levels. Quality issues related with infrastructure, programmes and faculty were identified as most prominent.

Quality assurance has remained a big challenge in many Sub-Saharan African countries. Rampant cases of high student numbers, limited numbers of academic staff, limited funding among others were identified as sensitive quality assurance issues (Etomaru, 2021). To ensure quality assurance, Spail (2015) showed that the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUEA) had been established in 1980 to coordinate the development of higher education in East Africa's, quality teaching and research. This study intends to ascertain how observance of institutional autonomy or otherwise affects realization of quality assurance in Kyambogo University.

The study was guided by the Service Quality (Servqual) Model which was developed by the American marketing gurus Valarie Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Leonard Berry in 1985. SERVQUAL is based on five dimensions of ensuring quality, that is to say tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance and empathy. Tangibility according to this model refers to tangible facilities including physical facilities, equipment, appearance and personal among others. Reliability refers to capability to provide the promised service accurately and dependably.

Responsiveness refers to the willingness to provide prompt services to customers. The fourth dimension assurance which refers to the courtesy, knowledge of personal and ability to convey confidence and trust. While the last dimension is empathy which is the attention provided to individual customers. The model assumes that quality is based on the comparison of customers' expectations with perceptions of academic autonomy as perceived in line with the five dimensions of the model.

Haward (2006) defined quality assurance as any systematic process of determining whether a product or service meets required standards. In this study quality in university education entailed quality audits, quality of physical resources, staff capacities, student quality, office space, quality of staff, quality inputs processes and outputs among others. Etomoru et al. (2016) defined academic autonomy as the right to develop strategy, fully exercise and practice academic freedom and self-government with regard to internal activities.

1.1 Problem Statement

Providing quality university education remains central to national development in Uganda. To strengthen higher education, the government established regulatory and quality assurance frameworks through the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (2001) and the National Council for Higher Education. Despite these reforms, universities continue to experience persistent quality challenges, including inadequate staffing, deteriorating infrastructure, ineffective academic management systems, irregularities in staff promotion and appointment, weak teaching and assessment practices, and poor postgraduate completion rates (NCHE, 2022; Auditor General Reports, 2021 & 2023; Inspectorate of Government, 2022). These challenges are particularly evident at Kyambogo University, where concerns regarding institutional management and quality assurance continue to emerge. Consequently, this problem is likely to deny the achievement of sustainable development goal which calls for provision of quality university education to spear head development needs. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between institutional autonomy and the quality of university education at Kyambogo University.

1.2 Objectives

To establish the relationship between academic autonomy and Quality Assurance in Kyambogo University.

2. Related Literature

2.1 Academic Autonomy and Quality Assurance.

Shafere and Sharifi (2020) investigated factors influencing academic autonomy y and its dimensions in Isfahan, Cordiovascular medical and research center, Iran. Taking a mixed approach methodology, results revealed that academic autonomy dimensions in the economic, scientific, inter-organizational and intra-organisational contributed significantly on their quality assurance compared to any other factors. However, content wise, these dimensions did not indicate whether these disciplines were whole embrasive especially on the side of social sciences like political subjects which call for urgency to undertake this study. Empirically, Mutekenya (2023) revealed that there were no statistically significant relationship between financial autonomy and academic quality assurance in universities in universities. The mean scores on academic autonomy did not reveal any difference in financial autonomy in the two universities. Besides, this study was descriptive while this study was correlational in nature.

Jayapraskashnarayana et al. (2024) studied academic autonomy in higher education and established that academic autonomy can play a vital role in achieving goals and objectives of higher education goals. The independence academic institutions have regarding curriculum, teaching methods, research and academic policies greatly determines quality assurance possibilities in the university. Ofoyoro et al. (2016) in a study about the extent of institutional autonomy in determination of content and quality of university education in Uganda revealed that the government, the National Council for Higher Education and universities determine the content and quality of university education. This finding shows that the university is not totally free to determine the content delivered alone. Verghese and Martin (2014) revealed that in China and Vietnam there is a considerable degree of university autonomy in respect to determination of content and quality of education. The implication of this is that there is a relative degree of autonomy in the discharge of services. However, the study explored how autonomy is exercised in selection of content and the quality of university education.

Boer and Kersting (2015) noted that institutional autonomy in making decisions on academic matters allows university staff to use their competence effectively leading to quality service delivery. Alternatively, this study did not give how autonomy in academics is fully carried out in the university and how this influences on quality assurance which this study did. Etomoru, Ujeyo et al. (2016) in a study about institutional autonomy and its implications for teaching and research in public universities in Uganda showed that much as official government documents pronounced institutional autonomy for public universities in Uganda, teaching and research seemed

to be influenced by external forces to a great extent. However, this was a desktop review of documents while the proposed study was empirical.

3. Methodology

The study used an embedded research design with dominant quantitative and minor qualitative approaches. A number of 157 academic staff and 10 administrative staff served as study respondents and participants respectively. Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire and interview guide. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations at univariate level while a bivariate level, Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Multiple Linear Regression were used. Qualitative data was thematically analysed.

4. Results

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations on Quality Assurance concept.

Indicators of quality Assurance	$\bar{x}$	Std Dev
I am responsible to decisions made in the university	3.618	1.117
Funds are effectively allocated in this university	3.306	1.192
Allocation of funds in this university follows budget priority areas	3.289	1.185
The quality of teaching in the university is in line with current teaching standards	3.907	1.216
Research in this university is effectively done	3.601	1.015
Research in this university is more effectively with tangible outcomes	3.410	0.933
Staff recruited in this university are of a better quality (Phd) holders	4.381	1.025
There are relevant teaching facilities in this university	3.404	1.204
Teaching space is adequate in this university	3.815	0.867

Source: Primary data

Table 1 results shows that highest mean was 4.381 on item staff recruited in this university are of a better quality whereas lowest mean value was item “Allocation of funds in this university follows budget priority areas 3.289. These mean values showed that quality assurance was highly enforced in the university. The standard deviations indicated that 1.192 as the highest on item “Funds are effectively allocated in this university” lowest standard deviation was 0.933 on item “Research in this university is more effective with tangible outcomes. These standard deviations were low implying that respondents’ views did not vary from one respondent to another.

4.1 Academic Autonomy

Table 2. Means and standard deviations on academic autonomy.

Indicators of quality Assurance	$\bar{x}$	Std Dev
My university is free to determine academic programmes to be offered without approval of external authority	3.294	0.902
My university is free to initiate new academic programmes to be offered without the approval of external authority	3.300	1.095
My university can offer new academic programmes without prior accreditation	3.901	1.218
My university can determine academic programs independently without the approval of external authority	3.791	0.756
My university freely designs the content of their academic programmes/ courses without approval of external body	3.606	1.113
My university has freedom to decide on overall student numbers to enroll on a given programme without approval of external authority	3.890	0.702
My university has freedom to determine language of instruction without approval of external authority	3.96	0.693
My university has freedom to select quality assurance mechanisms to be adopted in running her academic programme without approval of an external authority	3.294	1.414
My university freely designs content in their academic programmes as well as courses without approval of external authority	3.890	0.76

Source: Primary data

Table 2 shows that the highest mean was on item “My university has freedom to determine language of instruction without external interference mean 3.96 while lowest mean was on item “My university is free to determine academic programmes to be offered without external interference mean 3.290. These mean values indicate that academic autonomy was fair. The standard deviations on all items were generally low with highest standard deviation as 1.414 on item “My university has freedom to select quality assurance mechanisms to be adopted in running her academic programme without approval of external authority and lowest standard deviation 0.693 on item “My university has freedom to determine language instruction without approval of external authority”. These standard deviations showed commonality of findings from one respondent to another.

4.2 Testing Hypothesis

To test the first hypothesis whether academic autonomy had a relationship on quality assurance, Pearson’s correlation co-efficient was computed and results are offered in Table 3:

Table 3. Pearson's Correlation Co-efficient Index between Academic Autonomy and Quality Assurance.

		Quality Assurance	Academic Autonomy
Quality Assurance	Pearson's correlation	1	0.184
	Sig. 2 tailed		0.015
	N	173	173
Academic Autonomy	Pearson's correlation	0.184	1
	Sig. 2 tailed	0.015	
	N	173	173

Correlation significant at 0.05 level (2 tailed)

Table 3 shows Pearson's Correlation Co-efficient Index between quality assurance and academic autonomy $r = 0.184$, $\text{sig} = 0.015$. This sig value was less than 0.05 implying that the research hypothesis which states that there is a positive significant relationship between academic autonomy and quality assurance was accepted. On the other hand, the null hypothesis which states that there is no relationship between autonomy and quality assurance was rejected.

These results suggested that as Kyambogo University is granted academic autonomy in terms of selecting what to teach, determining programmes staff to teach and other areas of academic setting, there is a greater possibility to achieve quality assurance in the university and the reverse is true. To confirm these findings a simple linear regression analysis was computed and results are offered in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Table 4. Model summary on Regression Results between Academic Autonomy and Quality Assurance.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.184 ^a	.034	.028	.27316

a. Predictors: (Constant), AAuto

The model summary table showed the adjusted r^2 square = 0.028. This meant that when expressed into a percentage academic autonomy explains only 2.8% of the change in quality assurance. It suggests that the remaining 97.2% is explained by other factors not considered in the study.

Table 5. ANOVA Table on the regression model between Academic Autonomy and Quality Assurance.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.447	1	.447	5.993	.015 ^b
	Residual	12.760	171	.075		
	Total	13.207	172			

a. Dependent Variable: Assure

b. Predictors: (Constant), AAuto

The ANOVA Table shows F value = 5.993 and significance P value = 0.015, less than 0.05 the critical level. This implied that there was a positive significant effect of academic autonomy and quality assurance in the university. It presupposes more that as academic autonomy is guaranteed, the greater the possibility that quality in areas of teaching, research and other core aspects of the university would be possible and the reverse is true.

Table 6. Co-efficient Results on the Regressions Model between Academic Autonomy and Quality Assurance.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.145	.202		15.573	.000
AAuto	.136	.056	.184	2.448	.015

a. Dependent Variable: Assure

The co-efficient table showed Beta value 0.184 and significance P value = 0.015. This significance P value was less than 0.015. This suggested that indeed academic autonomy had a positive significance effect on quality assurance in Kyambogo University.

5. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Results arrived at in this study revealed that academic autonomy and quality assurance at Kyambogo University. These results were in agreement with Jayaprakashnarayana et al. (2024) who established that academic autonomy can play a vital role in achieving goals and objectives of higher education goals thus quality assurance possibilities in the university. The results that Kyambogo university academic autonomy had a positive influence on quality assurance were in support of Verghese and Martin (2014) revealed that in China and Vietnam there is a considerable degree of university autonomy in respect to determination of content and quality of education. The implication of this is that there is a relative degree of autonomy in the discharge of services. This greatly helped to maintain quality assurance in the university.

Findings of the study were in the same vein with Owino, Ogachi and Maureen (2011) identified that partnership and participation in determination of content is essential in the enhancement of quality university education. Power to make decisions on content dissolves to operational units (faculties, institutes and departments). These operational units must have autonomy to discharge their functions effectively. Since it's them who determine what to teach, then they need to be offered with a high level of autonomy. The findings showed that having academic autonomy on quality assurance in the university. These results were in the same vein with Boer and Kersting (2015) noted that institutional autonomy in making decisions on academic matters allows university staff to use their competence effectively leading to quality service delivery.

Likewise, the findings of the study were in direct support of earlier studies like Mutekenya (2023) who revealed that there were no statistically significant relationship between financial autonomy and academic quality assurance in universities in universities. The mean scores on academic autonomy did not reveal any difference in financial autonomy in the two universities. Besides, this study was descriptive while this study was correlational in nature.

Findings of the study differed from Ofoyoro, Lukwago and Kimoga (2016) who revealed that the government, the National Council for Higher Education and universities determine the content and quality of university education. This finding shows that the university is not totally free to determine the content delivered alone. The study findings that there a positive significant effect of academic autonomy on quality assurance in Kyambogo University were opposed to Etomoru et al. (2016) in a study about institutional autonomy and its implications for teaching and research in public universities in Uganda showed that much as official government documents pronounced institutional autonomy for public universities in Uganda, teaching and research seemed to be influenced by external forces to a great extent.

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, academic autonomy had a highly positive effect relationship on quality assurance at Kyambogo University.

5.2 Recommendations

From the earlier findings and conclusions, it is recommended that if quality assurance is to be enhanced at Kyambogo University, the university council and relevant administrators like university deans do the following; Always allow the university autonomy to determine courses to teach, determine content, assessment procedures

without adequate interference from external bodies. This could be done by reducing restrictions on course accreditation.

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