Research Application Summary

A paradigm shift from monitoring and evaluation to interdisciplinary evaluative systems thinking: The status of evaluative processes and use in African Universities

Owuor, C., Waswa, M., Osiru, M. & Adipala, E.

Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), P. O. Box 1681, Wandegeya- Kampala, Uganda

Corresponding author: c.owuor@ruforum.org

Abstract

This paper is an initial attempt to assess the status and use of evaluative processes in African universities to inform their strategic decisions in face of growing demands for universities to transform and be more relevant in development and innovation processes. The desired transformation is part of the broad organisational change process that requires universities to adapt to meet the ever increasing complex development challenges of national and regional scope. The study draws from evaluation studies and specific reports over a 10 year time horizon in over 20 African universities in 10 countries. The finding reveals that universities have fully established Planning Units with clear operational strategies and monitoring frameworks. However in practice, monitoring is largely activity based and used to assess compliance with work plans and budgets and few universities have well defined monitoring, evaluation, and learning strategies and where they exist, implementation is limited or at most, ad hoc. The paper seeks to build on the body of growing literature on evaluative thinking and the need for entities to put in place adaptive systems for learning and improving.

Key words: African universities, evaluation process, organisation change process

Résumé

Ce document est une première tentative pour évaluer l'état et l'utilisation des processus d'évaluation dans les universités africaines afin d'éclairer les décisions stratégiques de ces dernières face à la demande croissante aux Universités de se transformer et d'augmenter leur visibilité dans les processus de développement d'innovations. La transformation souhaitée fait partie du vaste processus de changement organisationnel qui demande que les universités changent pour répondre aux défis croissants et complexes de développement à l'étendue nationale et régionale. L'étude tire des examens d'évaluation et des rapports spécifiques de 20 Universités de 10 pays et ceci sur une période de 10 ans. Les résultats révèlent que les universités ont pleinement mis en place des unités de planification avec des stratégies opérationnelles claires et des cadres de suivi. Cependant, dans la pratique, le suivi est l'activité appliquée à une grande base et utilisée pour évaluer la conformité des plans de travail et

plans budgétaires. Quelques universités ont des stratégies de suivi-évaluation et d'apprentissage bien définies et là où elles existent, leur mise en œuvre est limitée ou plus appropriée. Le document cherche à enrichir la littérature croissante sur la réflexion évaluative et la nécessité pour les entités à mettre en place des systèmes adaptatifs pour l'apprentissage et le perfectionnement.

Mots clés: Universités africaines, processus d'évaluation, processus de changement organisationnel

Introduction

Organizations are continuously grappling with the use of findings from evaluative processes such as performance evaluation, development evaluations, formative evaluations, cost effective studies and cases studies to inform their internal systems, improve operational efficiency and strengthen organizational learning (Suarez-Balcazar and Taylor-Ritzer, 2014). A learning organization is conditioned to adapt and improve on its performance and contribute to innovation for evaluation (Eilertsen and London, 2005). This necessitates putting in place systems and structures that foster generation of lessons for learning and knowledge creation. The learning processes lead to creation of organization knowledge through "learning the how", a vital component for organizational effectiveness (Edmondson and Moingeon, 1996). According to Schein (2004), organizations do the same things all the time until the "tried" and "true" way no longer holds. This is due to the learning anxiety that is produced by the need and shift to learn something new. The organizational "learning how" and "learning why" therefore, determines its capability to compete in open market space and to deal with changing market environment (Brown and Duguid, 1996; Grant, 1996). This learning emanate from multiple sources but more critically, through evaluative processes. Substantive organisational readiness for evaluation is favourably influenced through direct evaluation capacity building, stimulating critical thinking, support reflective practice and facilitating internal evaluation culture to promote organisational learning also referred to as "evaluative thinking" (Cousins, 2004; McCoy *et al.*, 2013; Befani *et al.*, 2015). The concept of evaluative thinking continue to receive significant attention in both public and not-for-profit sectors as it seeks to contribute to new learning by providing evidence to chronicle, map and monitor progress, successes, failures and roadblocks in the innovation as it unfolds (Buckley and Archibald, 2013; Earl and Timperley, 2015). There are quite striking differences in organisational capacities to use evaluation in government agencies and voluntary organisations (Cousins *et al.*, 2014). Though, the underlying impetus is the ever increasing need for organisations to build internal evaluative capacities to inform sustainable organisational and cultural change (McCoy *et al.,* 2013).

In this respect, it is now a standard project management practice to embed evaluative actions during programme design. Blending the programme design consideration with the concept of evaluative thinking, leads to better understanding of organisational operating context, setting clear organizational learning questions, improve the theory of change through questioning the underlying assumptions and intervention logic, and enriching stakeholder engagement in the entire implementation cycle (Bonbright, 2013). The other dimension that

sets ground for evaluative processes in organizations, is the ever increasing incentives and rewards systems that is based on the growing climate of accountability that demand for evidence of results and transparent based implementation approaches. Major multilateral and institutional agencies have instituted robust accountability frameworks that use rigorous methods to prove impact and to the least, the effect of interventions and their investments. In 2012, the US Office of Management and Budget issued new standards that promote programmes demonstrating rigorous studies of effectiveness setting stringent impact measurement standards (USGOV, 2013). Similarly other agencies soon followed suit.

In respect to these global trends in demands for increased accountability, the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) institutionalized a project management policy of conducting evaluative activities of each initiative and assess its contribution to the organisation mission and vision of *"High performing African Universities that produce skilled, proactive graduates, demand driven research outputs and innovations in response to local, regional and national agricultural development priorities"*. The purpose for this is threefold; (a) to provide opportunities of better understanding of the realities and therefore institute more realistic plans, (b) ensure timely identification of bottlenecks to inform adaptive actions, and (c) whether the initiatives have achieved their intended impact. Over the last 10 years, RUFORUM successfully implemented a number of projects that have left an indelible mark of impact and transformation of agricultural higher education landscape in Africa.

Methodology

In this paper, we attempt to draw lessons from RUFORUM engagement with universities over the last 10 years to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation functions. The analysis is not based on the programmatic achievements of each initiative, but rather on the cross cutting elements of the need to build a body of credible evidence for policy engagement and partnerships. The analysis is informed by the growing demand for development actors to institute internal evaluation adaptive systems, influence policy decisions and build multi-level collaborations.

Current evaluative processes in Africa in Universities

The cross-cutting thread in all RUFORUM initiatives is the capacity building element at both individual and institutional levels. At individual level, the results are clear cut, with performance measurement metrics taking into consideration parameters like the number of graduates trained, scholarships awarded, academic mobility and alumni placement. These metrics are standard regardless of the training institution. Therefore the individual capacity development outcomes are clearly understood and definition of success level well specified, and easy to ascertain the chain of cause and effect. However, at institutional level (University), the assessment and measurement of institutional capacity development is a complex affair. This comes at the backdrop of growing global trend in demands for increased accountability that have not spared the Africa universities either. The demand towards performance management, award of service contracts, ISO certification, and impact of university training

and research on technology and innovations development and the need for broad accountability is leading to growing demand for evaluative systems to support decision making. On the outlook most Africa universities have fully established Planning Units with clear operational strategies and monitoring frameworks. However in practice, monitoring is largely activity based and used to assess compliance with work plans and budgets and few universities have well defined monitoring, evaluation, and learning strategies and where they exist, implementation is limited or at most, ad hoc. Most universities have clear procedures for Quality Assurance (QA) and this is seen as a fundamental proposition that ground their core training and research functions. We observe that universities are setting higher benchmarks above the basic requirements of their respective National Councils of Higher Education regulations and other regional quality assurance framework. This is a right ambition for African universities as it has potential to cause their transformation into world class universities. We observe that universities are increasingly investing in tracer studies, a widely accepted approach for tracking impact of universities thought benchmark indices such as proportion of past students who find employment, sectors in which they work, their job performance, and employer satisfaction with them. The tracer study is a powerful strategic evaluative tool for universities to support curricula reviews, designing new market relevant courses and training students ready for the market.

Whereas universities hold a pool of knowledge, evaluations of research projects are mostly externally driven and or restricted to projects undertaken in collaboration with governments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or CGIAR centres. This implies that most Africa Universities have inadequately constituted internal evaluation systems to meet external accountability and satisfy their organisational learning requirements. Most universities have instituted information management systems to effectively improve students' record management. This is seen as a bold step. However, we observe that there is little cataloguing of research findings and how they are being used. In general terms, there is limited capacity to implement monitoring and evaluative actions in most universities. In the next section, we provide an example of how RUFORUM uses evaluative processes to engage in policy dialogue and the associated challenges in doing so.

RUFORUM made a strategic shift to engage at multiple levels in Policy advocacy as a transitional step to become a champion and voice for agricultural higher education in Africa. However, from the monitoring and evaluation perspective, the challenges lies in estimating the attribution and contribution effects in face of actions by other actors of the resulting regional and continental policy shifts. The increased organizational engagement in advocacy calls for reflective and continuous assessment progress markers to elicit flexibility and responsiveness to capture incremental qualitative output for purposes of estimating impact. In this case, the need for numbers to qualify results is not a necessary requirement and most likely the quantitative indices turn out to be meaningless as the basis for assessing progress is premised on an arbitrary scale that is not universally understood. The remedy for this challenge is to have measured engagement with teams to reflect on emerging trends, harmonise processes and systems. This necessitates continuous acquisition of "political intelligence" and having adaptive monitoring and evaluation systems to capture the engagement processes. The presence of promoters and like-minded actors in positions of influence may

considerably hasten the achievement of the end result and in the process, render the implementation strategies obsolete.

Conclusion

Evaluative thinking which is the on-going systematic practice of asking questions, questioning assumption, collecting and validating and analysing evidence and using evidence to inform decision is gaining credibility among development actors. This new paradigm will necessitate rethinking of University organisational learning and development systems and instituting adaptive frameworks to support their core roles of training, research and outreach.

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USAGov 2013. 78590 Federal Register Vol. 78, No. 248 / Thursday, December 26, 2013 / Rules and Regulations OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET 2 CFR Chapter I, and Chapter II, Parts 200, 215, 220, 225, and 230 Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards Vol. 78, No. 248 / Thursday, December 26, 2013 / Rules and Regulations.