

Forum deliberates quality issues in higher learning

The three-day African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) Forum 2023, hosted by the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU), shed light on critical issues facing higher education in Africa

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Dar es Salaam. The influx of student enrollment and the urgent need to move with digital transformation speed in African universities are areas giving quality assurance headaches, a forum heard on Tuesday.

The three-day African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) Forum 2023, hosted by the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU), shed light on critical issues facing higher education in Africa.

The Minister for Education, Science, and Technology, Prof Adolph Mkennda, acknowledged the challenges posed by the rapid growth of higher learning institutions, emphasising the need for a delicate balance between accommodating the increasing number of students and ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of education quality.

"Universities are blossoming, students' enrollment is at the highest pace, and unemployment among our graduates is a huge discussion, but we have to deliberate on better ways to deal with all these issues," Prof Mkennda stated during his opening address.

Addressing the issue of a scarcity of facilitators and lecturers in African universities, Prof Mkennda stressed the importance of intra-university collaboration.

"This association should help us

come up with how we can make collaboration more of an opportunity when it comes to staff exchange as part of the ways to improve and maintain the best quality in our institutions," he suggested.

He also highlighted the financial challenges faced by universities, especially private ones, warning that a lack of funds could compromise the focus on quality and turn it into a mere pursuit of student numbers.

"This is another area that requires attention and balance to ensure that the best GPA acquired by a graduate is reflected in his or her performance in the market," Prof Mkennda emphasised.

The second major theme of the forum revolved around the pressing need for digital transformation in higher learning institutions. The Director of Research and Programmes from the Association of African Universities (AAU), Prof Frederick Armah, stressed the importance of understanding and effectively using digital pedagogies and infrastructure

for the transformation of teaching and learning.

"A solid understanding of what digital transformation means is essential, as it is an incentive structure to encourage teachers to develop innovative teaching methods. Here again, quality assurance of the institutional transformation process is critical for success," noted the director.

Despite the ongoing digital transformation, it was highlighted that many lecturers lack the specialised instructional skills needed to effectively use digital tools and technologies. The director emphasised that in the post-Covid era, virtual cooperation has become the new currency of higher education, underscoring the need for cooperative approaches to global concerns.

"In the age of generative artificial intelligence, there is a need for AfriQAN to digitally transform through interactive, participatory processes to make equitable learning and quality assurance systems our mission: to hone our digital leadership skills and tap into the wealth of knowledge available in the underused learning sciences," he added.

TCU Executive Secretary, Prof Charles Kihampa, emphasised that through the forum, higher learning institutions from all countries have the opportunity to rethink higher education delivery and inform policymakers on the key areas of focus.

"We get a chance to discuss the state of higher education in our countries and deliberate on how best we can further improve and harmonise our cooperation," Prof Kihampa stated.

The Tanzanian Ministry of Education promised to work on the proposals that would come out of the forum.

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PROF MKENDA | MINISTER