

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ARTS TEACHER EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM THE ARTS EDUCATION COLLEGE IN LAOS

Jaminan Kualiti Dalam Pendidikan Guru Seni: Pelajaran dari Kolej Pendidikan Seni di Laos

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate issues of quality assurance at the Arts Education College of Laos. The researchers interviewed participants from two main categories: directors and heads of sections. The study found a number of issues concerning quality assurance at the institution. First, it found that there was lack of a clear development policy which was manifested through the lack of vision on capacity building, failure to provide a clearly laid out plan or development agenda by the administration, failure to support in-service training and academic upgrading for lecturers, no clear focus on the development goals and unclear plans of dealing with the challenges that are impeding quality education at the college. The study also found that the college did not have any mechanism for quality assurance. In relation to this, it found that the state of quality assurance at the college was not satisfying. However, the administrators were optimistic that improvement was imminent.

Keywords: Arts Education College, ASEAN, Laos, Quality Assurance.

Abstract

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menyiasat isu-isu jaminan kualiti di Kolej Pendidikan Seni Laos. Para penyelidik menemui peserta dari dua kategori utama: pengarah dan ketua bahagian. Kajian mendapati terdapat beberapa isu berkaitan jaminan kualiti di institusi terlibat. Pertama, didapati bahawa terdapat kekurangan dasar pembangunan yang jelas yang ditunjukkan melalui kekurangan visi pada pembinaan kapasiti, kegagalan untuk menyediakan pelan atau agenda pembangunan yang jelas oleh golongan pentadbir, kegagalan untuk menyokong latihan dalam perkhidmatan dan peningkatan akademik untuk pensyarah, tiada tumpuan yang jelas terhadap matlamat pembangunan dan rancangan yang tidak jelas untuk menangani cabaran yang menghalang pendidikan yang berkualiti di kolej tersebut. Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa kolej tersebut tidak mempunyai sebarang mekanisme untuk memastikan jaminan kualitinya. Sehubungan dengan ini, didapati keadaan jaminan kualiti di kolej tersebut tidak memuaskan. Walau bagaimanapun, para pentadbir kolej tersebut optimis bahawa penambahbaikan akan berlaku.

Kata kunci: Kolej Pendidikan Seni, ASEAN, Laos, Jaminan Kualiti.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Art has always remained an important aspect of people's culture, tradition, and history. Both ancient and contemporary societies show commonality of value in Art, its relevance manifesting in societal aesthetics, cultural festivals, and entertainment in

general among several other contexts. The place Art holds in the society has seen it morphing into an institutionalized activity, leading to its incorporation into the education system. From primary through to tertiary levels, subjects and courses belonging to Fine and Performing Arts have found their way into the curriculum. These include subjects on traditional and modern music instruments, folksongs, dancing, sculpture, painting, and drawing among several others. The teaching of the Art subjects and courses in the school system has generated the concept of what is now called Arts Education.

Arts Education forms part of the education curriculum globally. This is reflected in education policies which almost universally recognize the value of the Arts. In the United States alone, for example, forty-seven states have arts-education mandates, forty-eight have arts-education standards, and forty have arts requirements for high school graduation (Smith, 2009). In China, with the fast development of education, Arts Education equally became an important part of the overall education system from way back. To date, Arts Education has accelerated even higher, maintaining its presence at all levels of schooling (Yue, 2009).

However, although Arts Education is relevant, its availability and access also varies from country to country. In addition to that, even where Arts Education is implemented, there are various factors that affect its quality. The quality of Arts Education in institutions of higher learning in turn affects how Art is taught in primary and secondary schools. This is so because, in different countries, there are institutions for teacher education that specifically target training of teachers in Arts. Even in countries where there are no such specific institutions, Arts Education exists as a faculty or department where teachers are still trained. As such, quality assurance is one of the critical areas that have to be looked into to ensure a successful implementation of Arts Education worldwide.

In Lao People's Democratic Republic, Arts Education is equally highly valued. It is offered at all levels of education (from primary through university). Teachers of the Arts are trained at the Arts Education College where they obtain various academic qualifications, after which they are deployed into public schools. Being the main source for Arts teachers across the country, it is important that matters of quality at the college be strictly adhered to. This is because Arts Education as offered throughout the country relies on the college. It is against such a background that this study sought to explore the state of quality assurance at the college.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly treatment on quality assurance in higher education globally is enormous. However, there has not been enough attention to the phenomenon pertaining to Arts Education in Laos. For a support of the study's contextual background therefore, the researchers reviewed available literature on quality assurance in higher education in general. This was on the pretext that the Arts Education College in Laos shares commonalities with other institutions of higher learning both locally and internationally. As such, the literature that was reviewed ranges from international perspectives on quality assurance in higher education through quality assurance in the ASEAN to problems of quality assurance in Laos higher education.

2.1 International Perspectives on Quality Assurance in Higher Education

As stated earlier, quality assurance is a global phenomenon. A lot of countries have various bodies responsible for assuring quality in institutions of higher learning. In addition to that, there are different combined efforts targeting the initiation and

implementation of certain projects and programmes that assist in ensuring that there is high quality teaching and learning in higher education institutions. It has to be noted that we cannot talk of quality assurance in Arts Education independently of the general picture because the target being higher learning institutions, the measures that are taken by different universities and colleges towards quality assurance cut across all fields in the institutions. This is mainly the case because Arts Education shares many common features with other disciplines in terms of assessment and quality assurance at the higher education level, although there might be features that are unique to it. For example, it is observable that Music Education in higher institutions – a part of Arts Education itself – despite its distinctive characteristics can be related to all three levels of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area which focuses on quality assurance in European institutions of higher education (Polifonia Accreditation Working Group, 2010).

In Europe, the need to ensure that there is quality education in higher institutions has been treated with the urgency and seriousness it deserves. Following the Bologna Declaration, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was tasked to develop 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines and to explore an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and accreditation agencies or bodies' in 2003 (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). The declaration was a pledge made by 29 countries to reform the structure of their higher education systems in a convergent way.

In addition to that, there exists Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area which were adopted by ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 (ESG, 2015). Since then, there has been considerable progress, qualifications frameworks, recognition and the promotion of the use of learning outcomes (ESG, 2015). This is in line with the belief that quality assurance plays a very important role in higher education systems and institutions in responding to changes in areas that define higher education such as missions, mode of educational provision and cooperation, growth of internationalization, digital learning and new forms of delivery. All this is looked at in line with ensuring that qualifications achieved by students and their experience of higher education remain at the forefront of institutional missions. The ESG report notes that through engagement with quality assurance processes, European higher education systems demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programs and other provisions (ESG, 2015).

Pertaining to Australia, development of quality assurance in higher education has been influenced by significant changes in government policy and societal expectations. The Australian government initiated a review of higher education in 2008. One of the outcomes of the review was the birth of a national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), with responsibilities to: register all higher education providers, accredit the courses of the non-self-accrediting providers, assure quality against externally set standards and reduce risk by monitoring institutional performance on various measures (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

Similarly in China, quality assurance in higher education has also gained significant momentum. The Government's National Programme for the Reform and Development of Education in the Medium and Long Terms (2010–2020) envisages that, by 2020, China will be a leading power in terms of human resource development, and that higher education will have entered a phase of massification (Wu, Xie, Wu, & Qi, 2017). With higher education in a critical period of transition, the government considers it imperative to intensify efforts to develop quality assurance and enhancement in the Chinese higher education sector (Wu et al, 2017).

2.2 Quality Assurance in the ASEAN Higher Education

ASEAN refers to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations which was formally established by the Bangkok Declaration in 1967 with the agreement of six countries and was later joined by four others in the South East of Asia. Understanding the trends in quality assurance in the region is very crucial as Laos is a member state of the organization. This means the ASEAN also influences the trends of quality assurance in the country.

In 2007, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization-Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED) set out to raise awareness among policy decision makers and academics on the importance of harmonization in higher education in the region (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, 2017). It identified the need for a regional quality assurance framework; capacity building of all stakeholders through cooperation; student mobility; a regional credit system; and promotion of benefits of quality assurance amongst others. This was followed by the Kuala Lumpur Declaration which led to the establishment of ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) in 2008. Its establishment had as objectives the sharing of good practices of quality assurance in higher education, collaborating on capacity building and facilitating the recognition of qualifications, and developing a regional quality assurance framework for Southeast Asia (Pijano, 2014). AQAN is a network of 10 national quality assurance authorities and ministries responsible for higher education in the ASEAN member countries, which includes Laos (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, 2017).

The AQAN was followed by the establishment of the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAFHE) in 2011. Its objective is to promote regional harmonization in higher education by developing a quality assurance framework with regional identities where the ASEAN countries could set targets and align their quality assurance systems of higher education (Pijano, 2014). The project also facilitates regional recognition of degrees and qualifications and acts as a common reference point for quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions as they strive towards harmonization amidst the diversity of higher education systems, cultures and traditions within the region (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, 2017). The approval of the AQAFHE occurred in 2013, with the name later shortened to AQAF in a bid to make it more inclusive to other education institutions that could not identify themselves as belonging to higher education. The framework is comprised of four sets of interrelated principles (Pijano, 2014), namely:

- a) External Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAA)
- b) External Quality Assurance (EQA) Standards and Processes
- c) Institutional Quality Assurance (IQA)
- d) National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

According to the framework, each of the four principles focuses on core statements. The framework's purpose is to promote good practices for internal and external quality assurance as well as the establishment and implementation of national qualifications frameworks in the ASEAN Member States (AMS) (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, 2017). It targets the provision of an understanding of quality assurance within ASEAN countries (Matei & Iwinska, 2016).

2.3 Problems of Quality Assurance in Laos' Higher Education

In Laos, quality assurance in post-secondary institutions has become the focus of administrators and educators recently. The Lao PDR is one of the ten ASEAN nations in the region which have just started implementing among other programs the National Quality Assurance Framework in its higher education institutions. Due to this delay,

quality assurance remains a significant challenge for the country in raising its educational standards (Bin, 2016). Still, through its current involvement (albeit late) in the ASEAN framework (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, 2017), it would be anticipated that quality assurance in the country would be tilting towards regional standards. However, existing literature points to the contrary.

Hayden (2019) corroborates this by noting that one of the main challenges of higher education in Laos concerns the need for better quality. For example, he observes that the qualification levels of academics in the country are poor by international standards. At present, just less than 5% of all academic staff members in institutions of higher learning across the country possess a doctorate (Hayden, 2019). Hayden further notes that teaching skills of the lecturers are not well developed, and there is little or no professional support available to assist with teaching improvements (p.21). Further, despite cognizance of the need for a vibrant research engagement in the country, research productivity remains low. This is because academics have neither the skills nor the resources to engage in significant research projects (Hayden, 2019).

Realizing the need to improve the quality of higher education, there have been system-wide quality assurance policies and procedures introduced in the country. However, implementation is too slow and there is not much evidence to date regarding their impact (Hayden, 2019). To demonstrate the lack of concerted efforts in ensuring quality assurance measures are adhered to in the country's higher education, there was only one university in the country which had been a member of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and had been implementing QA standards in its educational programmes since 1997 as of 2016 (ASEAN University Network, 2016). Quality assurance and accreditation systems are still being developed but are not yet functioning (Siharath, 2010). For instance, the Education Quality Assurance Centre (EQAC) was established only in 2008. Its main roles are to develop quality assurance policies and quality assurance systems for all education sub-sectors in the country, to develop national education standards for all levels, formulate tools for quality assessment, procedures and set up an accreditation system of the country (Sachchanand, 2015). Quality assurance standards for institutions of higher education were consequently developed in the period between 2011 and 2013. Since then, further procedures for assessment have been introduced for self-assessment of the institutions, for external assessment, and for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (SHARE, 2016).

The setting up of EQAC has been of great importance to the standards of higher education in the country in a number of ways. For instance, since the finalization of institutional standards, higher education institutions which offer bachelor's degrees have received training on quality assurance. As of 2016, two external assessor-trainings had taken place offering support for a total of 55 Higher Education professionals (SHARE, 2016). The EQAC holds the responsibility for developing quality assurance policies and procedures for all education sub-sectors, including public and private higher education as well as secondary and technical education and vocational training. However, since it is relatively new, it is still lacking in several aspects in terms of its capacity.

The problems of quality assurance in the country have led to another serious rising issue: a lack of coherent regulatory framework for private colleges and universities. In recent years, the number of private universities/colleges has grown rapidly to absorb excess demand for higher education (Siharath, 2010). However, private institutions are largely unregulated and little information is available on the relevance and quality of these institutions. Development of a coherent regulatory

framework is urgently required to ensure their quality standards and relevance to labor market demand (Siharath, 2010).

What the available data shows is the rise in quality assurance trends globally. This underlies the need for ensuring that there is continued quality in higher education. The constant need appears to be properly guided by international policy and legal frameworks that have also spurred new quality assurance systems in various regions and individual countries. This is experienced through the mechanisms that have been put in place in the developed world, with European countries, Australia, and China among others creating quality assurance frameworks that continue guiding the provision of higher education at the national level. There are similar trends in both developed and developing countries in regions such as the ASEAN where efforts have been registered in ensuring quality assurance at both the regional and national level. In these frameworks, the focus has been on both internal and external quality assurance, with institutional quality assurance being guided by the general national quality assurance frameworks. Following similar trends, available literature demonstrates existing attempts at improving quality assurance for higher education in Laos. This is through the various initiatives such as the National Quality Assurance Framework and the ECAQ as well as its participation albeit at low levels in the ASEAN University Network. From the available data however, it is also clear that there is a dearth of literature on quality assurance in Arts Education globally as studies tend to focus on higher education in general. This justifies the need for research into quality assurance specific to Arts Education, and Laos presents a perfect case for such studies with its Arts Education College.

2.4 The Arts Education College

Although there are several institutions of higher learning in Laos, it is only the Arts Education College in Vientiane that provides Arts Education. The other institution where art is offered as a course is the National Fine Arts Institute where along other programs they offer art courses. Graduates from the latter institution become professional artists if they choose Art as their major. The college is the only institution of higher learning that trains Arts Education teachers in the country and presents itself as a complete Arts Education school.

The Arts Education College was originally established in 1982 as the Fine Arts School (FAS) and it operates under the Ministry of Education just like most of the institutions of higher learning in the country. In 1988, the FAS changed to the Fine Arts Teacher Training School under the direct responsibility of the Department of Teacher Training (DTT), Ministry of Education (MoE). During this period, the institution offered under-diploma qualifications (certificates) to its students. In 2008, responsibility for the Fine Arts Teacher Training School was transferred from the Department of Teacher Training to the Department of Physical and Arts Education (DPAE) following a decree by the Minister of Education on July 24, 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 2009, the institution's name was changed again to the Arts Education College (Ministry of Education, 2009).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Based on the qualitative research design, the study employed oral interviews and document analysis. The earlier was generated from materials available both at the Arts Education College and the internet. The interviews helped in the generation of most recent and relevant insights on quality assurance at the Arts Education College. Similarly, the documents that were reviewed for the study complemented the data

collection and analysis processes by supporting the assertions obtained in the oral interviews. For the oral interviews, the researchers interviewed two categories from the administrative section of the Arts Education College. These included 3 directors (1 main director and 2 deputy directors) and 5 heads of sections. Common themes were then picked from the collected data, which were then subjected to analysis pertaining to their relevance. Data on the lecturers' academic qualifications was tabulated for easier presentation. The interviews were carried out between September 2018 and January 2019 at the Arts Education College in Vientiane, Laos.

4.0 RESULTS/FINDINGS

Data from the interviews that were conducted showed similarities in opinion, to a varying degree, from both the directors and the heads of sections. The data has been divided into sub-sections arising from common themes that were deduced from the interviews. These included information on the vision, mission and policies of the college; the absence of quality assurance measures; unsatisfying academic qualifications of the college's lecturers, resources availability and the general state of the quality of education offered at the institution.

4.1 Vision, Mission and Policies of the Arts Education College

The Arts Education College as its vision aims to develop teaching-learning, creativity works, research and the preservation of national culture. This understanding is cross-cutting amongst all the administrators at the college who include the Director and his deputies as well as the heads of sections. The understanding comes from the fact that as an institution, the college has its vision, mission statement and policies spelt out clearly.

The college has several objectives that fall under its mission. These include: to identify the criteria of application of students; to value teachers and students; to promote honesty; to encourage good manners and good ethics; to promote Lao culture; to focus on high quality learning and teaching methods; to have lecturers who are experienced and available to work; to improve the administration system; to improve the quality of education and curriculum in alignment with the regional and global educational systems; to encourage research; to promote and improve partnership with the government and private sectors at national and international levels; to improve infrastructure and facilities for a better educational environment; and to make the Arts Education College become a centre for development and keep staying on the right path of excellence.

As a public institution, all the administrators interviewed noted that the college's policies are always in line with what the government stipulates. The Director attributed this to the significance of support and partnership because to achieve the college's goals, it requires collaborative efforts. "We align our working framework with government policies to improve the college's education quality with the concept of good teaching-good learning and strengthening scholar capacities". The Director also indicated that as per policy, the college supports government through allowing teachers to pursue higher education at national and international levels, to gain more knowledge and experience. All the administrators noted that the priority of the college in its policy is to promote quality higher education through the continuous upgrading of teachers' capacities.

As all the administrators explained, the college's policies work well with its mission. One of the deputy directors stated that in order to raise the college's educational quality, the institution now focuses on improving human resource and

making sure that the lecturers are ready to teach students with multi techniques. "Last but not least, we plan to upgrade our college to be a great institution in the future; we have many things to do to match the criteria since we need to improve from the infrastructure and quality of teaching-learning".

4.2 Quality Assurance Measures

The study found that the Arts Education College did not have any mechanism for quality assurance. One of the deputy directors said instead the college had a learning-teaching assessment for mid-term test and final test. "In 2016-2017, with supervision from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), we started to work in the field of quality of education and in 2017-2018, the monitoring and evaluation section improved its tools for internal assessment which followed 10 criteria and 50 indicators of the MoES' Education Standards and Quality Assurance Centre. This mechanism aims to improve the quality of education to a better level".

According to the Director of the college, the monitoring and evaluation section aims at being a reference as legislature for creating evaluation tools for development of learning and teaching. These have to follow with the criteria of Ministry of Education and Sports. The Director also stated that the monitoring and evaluation section has recently released tools for assessment and did an internal assessment "to make sure that our work will be better in terms of quality and quantity". However, the Director also observed that the establishment of the monitoring and evaluation section encounters challenges as it is still in its infancy, citing the need to continue learning from other colleges and universities (both national and international).

This need was also shared by the Head of Assessment and Evaluation Section who expressed the need to meet the education quality at the college through hard work. For example, the Head proposed improvement of technical work through modifying the curriculum to be better from phase to phase, purchasing and improving educational materials and finally setting up entrance examinations for students who wish to enroll at the Arts Education College. "Another mechanism is about sharing experiences and learning through observing fellow teachers."

According to the college's Director, to ensure that the institution's educational quality is improved and integrated with regional and international standards, the college has revised and edited its educational curriculum for diploma and bachelor's degree to align it with demands of civil service. The Director added that the college has improved the tools for teacher assessment; curriculum analysis and teacher-training to improve teaching skills for better learning. The college has planned for a relatively longer period of development spanning the 2017- 2025 period as below:

- a) To identify a strategic plan for development.
- b) To identify the purpose and objective of development.
- c) To recruit and allocate human resources to appropriate work.
- d) To create an internal data base.
- e) To improve college infrastructure and resources for learning.
- f) To create a framework to improve and develop the teaching and learning methods in each phase
- g) To train, improve and coach teachers to be skilled.

4.3 Academic Qualifications of Staff

Finding out about quality assurance at the college also involved a look into the qualifications of the institution's lecturers. The question on their qualifications and whether they were satisfying was asked to the directors since they are responsible for recruitment of human resource and ensuring that quality is adhered to. The table

below is a representation of the lecturers' academic qualifications as described by the directors:

Table 1: Lecturers' Academic Qualifications

Qualification		Lecturers	Percentage
Valid	Certificate /Under graduate	4	8.0
	Diploma	6	12.0
	Bachelor	31	62.0
	Master	9	18.0
	Other (Specify)	0	0.0
	Total	50	100.0

The data in table 1 shows that most of the lecturers in the arts education college have bachelor's degree (31 of them, representing (62.0%), 9 of them (18.0%) have master's degree, 6 of them (12.0%) have diplomas and 4 (8.0%) hold a mere certificate. The results indicate that most of the lecturers are bachelor's degree holders.

The directors (one main director and two deputies) were positive about the qualifications, noting that although the highest qualified lecturers possessed a master's degree, the fact that most of them had upgraded their studies to bachelor's degrees from their previous programmes was a sign that there is progress at the institution. The main Director mentioned the fact that most of the teachers have recently upgraded from both national and international institutions of higher learning. This is good for development of the college. The Director stated that "presently, most of our teachers completed their bachelor's degree and some of them graduated from abroad with bachelor's and master's degrees, we are happy with their qualifications". However, all the directors noted that there was still a problem as some of these teachers have not pursued their further studies in their areas of specializations, which sometimes makes their qualifications not very helpful in terms of practicality of their knowledge transmission to students at the college.

4.4 Resource Availability

Another important question that was asked to the administrators is related to resource availability. The researchers wanted to find out whether the available resources are sufficient enough to support high quality education at the institution. What transpired was a lack of resources that negatively impacts on quality assurance. The Director noted that while the college has some resources, they are not sufficient enough to meet the demand of the institution. The study found that the college has insufficient infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, other necessary classroom facilities such as air-conditioning etcetera. This was also corroborated by the two deputy directors and the 5 heads of sections who argued that this insufficiency affects the quality of education at the institution.

4.5 The Current State of Education Quality

Exploring the general quality of education offered at the Arts Education College was also critical to this study. The study asked the various administrators to rate how they perceived the quality of teaching and learning at the institution on an imaginary scale from high to low and the reasons for their rating. Most of the administrators rated the quality as medium noting that it was still better than in the past: not high, not low. With regards to this, the Director of the college observed that "we are at a very low level

when compared to the quality of education in developed countries. The main reason for this is that we have insufficient quantity of school infrastructure and facilities like school buildings, library, practice rooms and educational materials". This was corroborated by one of the two deputy directors. The other deputy director and the five section heads argued that they considered the state of quality assurance at the institution as medium – and not low, because citing the progress that the college has registered since its establishment.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study generated important insights to the researchers. Such insights, which hinged on the college's policy and vision, the lecturers' qualifications and the state of quality, are captured in this section. Also included are recommendations from the participants and additional ones from the researchers.

5.1 An Unclear Policy and Vision

As observed, the main problem with the policy and vision of the Arts Education College is that it is not clear on capacity building. For example, although the college provides scholarships for its staff to study in other countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, it does not provide further financial support. This lack of clear policy and vision on capacity building is also manifested in the lack of sufficient in-service training, which is also most of the times strained by a poor budget on which the college runs. Further, although there is a stipulated vision and mission for the college, the policy is not clear on the development plan. There is no laid out plan on what has to be carried out for the college to develop further from its current state. There is also no clear focus on goals that have to be attained by specific periods by the college or its various sections/departments.

Another main issue with policy and vision relates to the administration and management of the college in academics where discussions with the directors revealed that it is not strong. There are no efforts in addressing the challenges that are faced in teaching and learning. The college always follows a routine. It is very conservative in that there is usually an absence of new initiatives aimed at bringing positive change towards management of its academic affairs. This also trickles down to the academic staff who are often lacking in terms of focus. The lecturers keep carrying out their duties the same way: the teaching methodologies, the content etcetera. There are no efforts to improve because the administration does not facilitate reforms in all the aspects of the college since there is no policy framework that provides guidance for such initiatives.

5.2 Qualifications of Lecturers

Academic qualifications of the lecturers were also another critical issue in the findings. The study found that an overwhelming majority of lecturers at the college are degree holders, with very few in possession of a master's degree. For the few with the master's degrees however, it transpired that most of them studied in programmes that were not directly beneficial to their roles as lecturers at the Arts Education College. This is because most of them studied in programmes that are not at the core of education at the college. This was also the same with the bachelor's degree holders, some of who neither studied education nor Fine Arts. The lack of a clear policy on funding for staff to pursue further studies outside the country only worsened the situation as it implies lack of strong motivation for the lecturers to upgrade. This poses problems in as far as the lecturers' knowledge enhancement in Arts teaching is concerned.

5.3 The State of Quality Assurance

With most of the administrators rating the level of quality at the institution as medium, the current status with regards to quality requires urgent attention. This is the case because, as noted by the director, the deputy directors and the section heads, most of the problems have their origins in lack of teaching and learning resources. These include basic infrastructure for facilitation of Fine Arts and Music Education as well as human resource. In relation to human resource, the main challenge also appears to be related to qualification. As observed, most of the lecturers only hold a bachelor's degree. Further, most of them have limited knowledge from short courses. In extreme circumstances, there are diploma holders who lecture in bachelors' programmes. Most of them are now trying to upgrade by enrolling for studies in bachelors' programmes at the institution while they are still teaching. For those who possess postgraduate qualifications, they are mostly not directly related to their field of study. This means most of the master's qualifications are obtained in general subjects such as Philosophy, Psychology etcetera. For example, at the time of the study, in Music there were two lecturers who held master's degrees while in Fine Arts four lecturers held master's degrees.

Further, the study also revealed that both internal and external evaluation is rare. As the administrators noted, the college only improved its evaluation and assessment tools in the 2016/2017 academic year, which were then put to trial in the 2017/2018 academic year. Mostly, even the students' assessment of lecturers is random even though there is a policy that calls for regular assessment of lecturers' work.

5.4 Suggested Solutions

There were a number of suggestions that came up as a remedy to some of the quality assurance problems at the Arts Education College. One of the deputy directors highlighted the need for collaborative efforts from all staff at the institution to ensure that the education that is offered does not compromise quality. He however also called on the government to consider increasing its budgetary allocation to the college so that the college would in turn allocate part of the funding to infrastructural improvements. The deputy director believed that if there were enough classrooms, sufficient practice rooms, a highly resourced library and other necessary facilities, the quality of education at the institution would be of high standards compared to its current status. The appeal to dedication and collaborative efforts of the staff members was also made by the other deputy director. However, one of the heads of section provided a more practical approach in his recommendation. He suggested that there was need to separate staff into two categories: teaching and administrative staff. This should be done with the purpose of making sure that there is focus on each group's responsibility, that attention is not divided, in the end producing work that is of high quality.

However, the researchers note that there was another important aspect that was overlooked by the respondents with regards to improved quality of education at the institution: quality assurance mechanisms. There is need for the college to open up to and facilitate regular internal and external quality assurance evaluation. This would be in partnership with other institutions of higher learning both in the country and internationally. As noted earlier however, this would also depend on political will as the government is the main stakeholder in the management of the college. This implies that all activities that require financing wait on the government for implementation. As such, much as the college can come up with initiatives aimed at raising its quality standards, at present, it is only the government which can make sure

that such suggestions become fruitful. This can only be otherwise if in the long run deliberate policies towards making the college and other institutions of higher learning more independent, which again would first require sufficient funding for the college to rise to required national and regional standards.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study unearths the state of quality assurance in Arts Teacher Education through its focus on the Arts Education College in Vientiane, Laos. By focusing on an institution which trains teachers in Arts, the authors bring to attention critical areas that require urgent attention from relevant stakeholders in the country. These include policy makers and management of the Arts Education College, who on encounter with the study's findings are bound to be propelled into corresponding action. In addition to the suggestions which the researchers generated as possible solutions to the existing issues in quality assurance at the Arts Education College, the study sets itself as a relevant reference material to researchers with interest in Arts Education in Laos, the ASEAN, and around the globe as regards quality assurance. Although we would not consider this as a pioneer study in quality assurance pertaining to Arts Education, it is nevertheless a relevant contribution to the field. This is especially when we note the dearth of studies on the same as pointed out earlier. Thus, there are still several other areas related to Arts Education in Laos that require further research. For example, other researchers would want to enquire on the existing trends in Arts Education at the high school level where focus would be on delivery in the Art classroom.

7.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, the study found that quality assurance at the Arts Education College remains a critical issue that requires sufficient attention. This is due to failures in clearly defining the policy and vision of the college, insufficient in-service training and scholarships for further education for lecturers, lack of sufficient resources, and the absence of quality assurance mechanisms at institutional level. The study notes that there is need for collaborative efforts among various stakeholders such as staff, administration and the government to make sure that issues of quality are sorted out. However, the study also notes that government's role in education in the country implies that it should be at the forefront in its engagements with the Arts Education College to ensure that standards of education at the college adhere to both national and international quality assurance measures.

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