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Research Article

The Pursuit of Quality Assurance in Nigerian Universities: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The contemporary trend of global competitiveness has brought great concern for provision of quality education. Hence universities are called upon to respond through efforts in ensuring quality assurance in its programmes offerings. This study on the pursuit of quality assurance in Nigerian Universities: Issues and challenges was carried out to sample the perspective of 640 academic staff from four Federal Universities in South-South Nigeria. Survey research design was used for the study. Four research questions guided the study. A 40-item researchers' developed instrument called "Quality Assurance Practices Questionnaire (QAPQ)" was used for data collection. The instrument was validated and reliability estimate established through Cronbach Alpha with an index of 0.86. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. Findings indicated that various strategies exist to ensure quality assurance. Also the extent of quality assurance implementation is moderate. Findings also showed that many challenges impede the implementation of quality assurance in universities. Suggested remedies by the respondents to improve the implementation of quality assurance include; total commitment of university management to quality assurance, admission of students based on merit, adequate funding and sufficient infrastructural facilities among others.

Keyword: Challenges, Issues, Nigerian universities, Quality and Quality assurance

1. Introduction

Universities now are striving for quality in order to attain academic excellence and stay relevant in a globalized world. This is so because of the competitiveness in the current knowledge economy that has brought distinction to higher institutions of learning. Globally, there is heightened need for quality assurance in order to improve the quality provision of university education, achieve higher reputation and attain quality output. The concept of quality assurance is at the core of enhancement of the goals of education in Nigeria. Quality assurance is a global discourse and a worldwide trend that ensures sustainability of the prescribed standards in education and also guarantees achievement of the educational goals through effective teaching, learning, curriculum implementation, facilities/equipment availability, utilization and maintenance. The concept has since assumed multidimensional approach and as such, it is pervasive because it must be embraced in all areas in educational industry. Practically, quality assurance is directed at ensuring that the resources (human and materials) used for production (teaching and administrative processes), the services rendered

and the products produced are kept at high standard to meet the needs of immediate society and the nation, as well as, meeting global competitiveness.

The main aim of quality assurance in higher education is to stimulate, attain and increase institutions' effectiveness, and efficiency, cost saving, quality and transparency towards stakeholders interested and involved in it (Vaira, 2007). According to Fiberesima (2015) quality assurance aims at bringing about desired changes and improvement in standard, teaching, learning, implementation, curriculum, infrastructure, facilities and on the teaching and non- teaching staff. Quality assurance is a mechanism that ensures that teaching, learning, human and material resources are well monitored and evaluated accordingly, to meet the needs of the students. The quest for quality assurance in education, particularly in the university system, which is the apex of learning is for the purpose of ensuring the desired change, improvement and transformation in the Nigerian universities so as to meet global best practice.

According to Harvey (2012) quality assurance in education is a methodology or its application in checking the process or outcome with the purpose of ensuring compliance, control, accountability and improvement. UNESCO (2008) defined quality assurance as a systematic process of assessing and verifying inputs, outputs and outcomes against standardized benchmarks of quality to support and enhance quality, ensure greater accountability and help the harmonization of students across academic programmes, institutions and systems. Vlsceanu, Grunberg and Parlea (2007:74) gives a more embracing definition of quality assurance as "an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system".

The pursuit of quality assurance is the hall mark of the drive for academic excellence in universities. The pursuit of quality assurance in Nigerian universities entails actions, reactions, activities, programmes and strategies to surmount challenges in education quality, so as to ensure that university education is relevant to the national needs and global competitive demands. These strategies include undertaking capacity building of school inspectors and supervisors, professionalization of education standard and quality assurance practice, strengthening partnerships/collaboration among relevant stakeholders, establishing a Quality Assurance Management Information System (QAMS) that links with Nigerian Education Management Information System (NEMIS), reviewing and enriching the existing school curricular, development of instructional materials, establishment of a standardized assessment for monitoring and reporting learning achievement, provision and monitoring of teaching and research equipment grant, provision of ICT infrastructure and equipment in all schools among others (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008). In addition, it can also be stated that the pursuit of Quality Assurance (QA) includes application of external and internal mechanisms to improve and sustain quality in the system operations, so as to achieve educational general and specific goals.

Nigerian public universities have not been faring well in terms of quality education. Archibong (2013:174) observed that "Nigerian public universities have incurred the displeasure of stakeholders owing to unfulfilled expectations in terms of delivering mandates". Hence, quality assurance has been an issue bothering stakeholders in education. University management are challenged to set appropriate standards which will reflect the needs and expectations of stakeholders (Pongo, Asare & Abdul-Fatahi, 2015). Also, Adepoju and Akinola (2008) pointed out that universities are under increasing pressure to develop and promote quality assurance systems that are in line with global best practices in order to facilitate and enhance the recognition of credentials, as well as, competences of graduates.

Evidence abound to indicate that Nigerian universities are not faring well. There is the current trend whereby parents who could afford the cost, send their wards to either private universities or neighboring universities in Ghana or other countries in Africa, such as South Africa, Botswana and so on. The situation is made worst in terms of global competitiveness. Nigerian universities have not been listed among the league of world class universities. This is evidenced in the 2019 ranking of world universities that has placed the best four universities in Nigeria at number 1233 for University

of Ibadan; 1677 for University of Nigeria; 1704 for Covenant University and 2077 for Obafemi Awolowo University((Ranking Web Of Universities, 2019). These ranking of Universities have made Yoloye (2014) to assert that the position of Nigerian higher education map is at the back seat. Enu (2018:4) noted that there is "a strong connection between university ranking and quality assurance. The build-up to higher ranking is dependent on quality assurance due diligence observances".

In the 1960s and 1970s, Nigerian universities were known for high standards and their products were recognized and respected worldwide. This is not the case presently, as products of Nigerian universities are screened and scrutinized in foreign countries while being considered for post graduate studies or for employment. To further compound the issue of quality assurance is the phenomenal increase and expansion of Universities in Nigeria. Available information as at July, 2019, shows that Nigeria has a total of 170 universities. Out of this number, 91 are public Universities (43 Federal Universities and 48 State Universities), while 79 are private. This expansion comes with increase in students' enrolment as well as increase in programme of study which creates the problem of over bearing on available resources. For the phenomenal increase in students' population to be catered for, there must be real investment of resources. However, this is not the case as indicators point to chronic gross under-funding of the university system. Between 2009 to 2018 the federal government budgetary allocation to education were as follows: 7.25% in 2009; 4.83% in 2010; 6.16% in 2011; 8.20% in 2012; 8.55 in 2013; 9.94 in 2014; 7.74 in 2015; 6.10% in 2016; 7.38% in 2017 and 7.03% in 2018. These percentages fell short of United Nations recommendation of 26% yearly budgetary allocation to education. The shortfall and inadequate funding of public universities have manifested in over-crowded classrooms, ill-equipped workshops, libraries and laboratories or even outright non-availability of these facilities in some universities. Of course quality education can only be provided where resources are available.

A more worrisome aspect of paucity of funds that has affected quality is the cutting of corners in admission whereby excess number of students are given admission without recourse to carrying capacity. This has led to overstretching of existing facilities. Students are made to study compulsory courses such as ICT and yet do not have access to ICT facilities for the duration of the course. This is also noticeable in a course like entrepreneurship education which aims at equipping students for self-employment and yet facilities are not available to back up the theoretical instructions. At this juncture, one is inclined to ask, does this give rise to quality product of university education? The answer is found in the observation of Yoloye(2014: 362) that " the product of such higher education are mediocre, incompetent and empty barrels in terms of acquired mass body of knowledge, skills, logic, expressions and presentation of abstract and concrete imageries. Such graduates will be half-baked scholars and professionals who possess higher education certificate by tacit or proxy".

To maintain academic standards in universities, the federal government has put in place an external quality assurance body, the National Universities Commission (NUC), which acts as a watchdog to universities. The main function of NUC is to assess the university operations/ or its programmes to determine if it is meeting standards. Thus, in a bit to forestall the problem of quality in the university system in Nigeria, the NUC by way of its accreditation exercise ensures that standard and required quality are sustained by putting in place the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) for all undergraduate programmes in all Nigerian universities. However, Obikezie (2018) notes that the external quality assurance is a mere validation of the efficiency of the internal quality assurance mechanism. To complement the role of NUC in maintaining standards in universities, various universities have instituted internal quality assurance mechanism by establishing quality assurance units to monitor academic activities, as well as, promote improvement in its programme offerings. This is complemented by the existence of quality assurance committees at both faculty and departmental levels. However, the extent to which quality assurance is implemented, the issues and challenges are the concerns of this present study.

2. Statement of the Problem

Of recent, quality concerns have been bothering the minds of education stakeholders. Generally, there are complains about the quality of university products as not being of acceptable standards. Whereas products of Nigerian universities some years back were enjoying respect and acceptability globally and even within the sub-region but this has not been the case currently. There is noticeable knowledge gap, between graduates of universities and the needs of labour markets. At times graduates of universities are subjected to skills and remedial training in industries in order to bridge the knowledge gap so as to be integrated into the organization. Another indication of quality issues with the university system is the current trend whereby parents who could afford the cost are sending their children to foreign universities. Again, patronage of Nigerian universities by foreign students has drastically reduced over the years. All these are indications that Nigerian universities are not faring well in delivering its mandate of training high level manpower for the nation.

In order to ensure quality university education, the federal government in Nigeria has put in place the National Universities commission that is charged with the responsibility of maintaining standards through the conduct of accreditation of universities' programmes. Besides, individual universities have instituted some internal quality assurance mechanism to improve standards and quality of educational programmes. However, the issue whether universities are actually implementing quality assurance to improve quality education is not clear. Thus, the extent to which quality assurance is implemented and the challenges involved is the concern of this research. Therefore, while universities are pursuing quality assurance, it is imperative to find out the extent to which the processes are being implemented, together with the challenges involved. This underscores the need for a research of this nature.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the pursuit of quality assurance in Nigerian universities: Issues and challenges. Specifically, the study seeks to examine;
1. The quality assurance strategies in Nigerian universities.
2. The extent of implementation of quality assurance in Nigerian universities.
3. The challenges in the implementation of quality assurance in Nigerian universities.
4. The suggested remedies to quality assurance implementation in Nigerian universities.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the quality assurance strategies used in Nigerian universities?
2. What is the extent of implementation of quality assurance in Nigerian universities?
3. What are the challenges to attainment of quality assurance in Nigerian universities?
4. What are the suggested remedies to improve quality assurance practices in Nigerian universities?

5. Methodology

A survey research design was adopted for this study. The population of this study was 6,404 academic staff from four Federal Universities (University of Benin, University of Calabar, University of Port Harcourt and University of Uyo) in South-South Nigeria. A total of 640 staff made up of Deans of Faculties, Heads of Departments (HODs), Senior lecturers, Associate professors and Professors across the four Federal Universities were used as the study sample. These categories of lecturers were used as respondents because they have been teaching in the university system for a long time and were familiar with quality assurance practices. Besides, most of them were directly involved in quality assurance implementation. The instrument for data collection titled "Quality Assurance Practices

Questionnaire (QAPQ)" was specifically constructed by the researchers for data collection. Items in the instrument were derived from literature review. The instrument had four parts. The first part had 15 items and measured quality assurance practices with the response options of; Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) with their nominal values of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The second part had 13 items and measured extent of quality assurance implementation with response options of; highly implemented, moderately implemented, lowly implemented and not implemented with their nominal values of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The third part consisted of 22 items that measured challenges of quality assurance with response options of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The last part was on suggestions to improve quality assurance practices. This was an open-ended question and the respondents were expected to give their suggestions on ways of improving quality assurance practices. The instrument was validated by three professors in the Department of Educational Management, University of Calabar. The reliability estimate was established using Cronbach reliability method and the reliability index was 0. 86. This high index justified the use of the instrument for data collection. With the help of trained research assistants, the researchers administered 640 copies of questionnaire to the respondents and hundred percent response rate was achieved. Mean and standard deviation were used in data analysis. The cut-off point was determined by finding the average of the nominal values of the rating scale, which stood at 2.50.

6. Results

6.1   Research question 1: What are the quality assurance strategies used in Nigerian universities?

Mean and standard deviation were used to answer this question. Result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviations of the responses to the quality assurance strategies used in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Employment of qualified academic staff	640	3.17	0.89	Accepted
2	Monitoring of classroom teaching	640	3.04	0.90	Accepted
3	Alumni survey	640	2.86	0.97	Accepted
4	Staff development programme	640	2.93	1.05	Accepted
5	Adherence to carrying capacity	640	3.14	0.89	Accepted
6	Ethical re-orientation of university personnel	640	2.90	1.02	Accepted
7	Involvement of students and staff in quality assurance	640	3.16	0.83	Accepted
8	Use of external examination system	640	3.21	0.93	Accepted
9	Total commitment of university management to quality assurance	640	3.36	0.85	Accepted
10	Programme accreditation by NUC	640	3.09	0.94	Accepted
11	Provision of quality infrastructural facilities	640	3.07	0.94	Accepted
12	Examination monitoring committee	640	2.68	1.05	Accepted
13	Quality teaching	640	3.10	0.81	Accepted
14	Internal self-review	640	3.08	0.86	Accepted
15	Quality of students admission	640	3.23	0.91	Accepted
	Grand Mean		3.07	0.92	Accepted

Cut off Mean = 2.50

The result of the analysis in Table 1 indicates that all the items have the mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 and given that the average mean and standard deviation are 3.07 and 0.92 respectively. This showed a high degree of agreement with quality assurance strategies used in Nigerian universities.

6.2   Research question 2: What is the extent of implementation of quality assurance in Nigerian universities?

Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question. The result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviations of the responses to the extent of implementation of quality assurance practices in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Extent of implementation
1	Effective use of external examiners system	640	3.27	0.88	High
2	The use of appropriate staff-student ratio	640	2.90	0.91	Moderate
3	Correct staff mix	640	2.86	0.94	Moderate
4	Regular training of academic staff	640	2.79	0.93	Moderate
5	Internal quality assurance system	640	2.92	0.90	Moderate
6	Periodic instructional evaluation	640	2.89	0.90	Moderate
7	Use of adequate teaching resource	640	2.94	0.88	Moderate
8	Sufficient learning resource	640	2.42	0.95	Low
9	Admission of students based on carrying capacity	640	2.46	0.97	Low
10	Employment of qualified staff	640	3.13	0.90	High
11	Admission of students based on merit	640	2.69	0.95	Moderate
12	Monitoring of teaching and learning processes	640	2.48	1.01	Low
13	Periodic internal self-review mechanism	640	1.94	0.99	Low
	Grand Mean		2.74	0.93	Moderate

Cut off Mean = 2.50; 2.49&Below = Low; 2.50-2.99 = Moderate; 3.00 & Above = High

The result of the analysis in Table 2 shows that, the use of appropriate staff- student ratio, correct staff mix, regular training of academic staff, internal quality assurance system, periodic instructional evaluation, and use of adequate teaching resources had moderate extent of implementation. Sufficient learning resources, admission of students based on carrying capacity, monitoring of teaching and learning processes and periodic internal self-review mechanism had low implementation as their mean scores are 2.42, 2.46, 2.48 and 1.94 respectively. However, effective use of external examiner system and employment of qualified staff were regarded as highly implemented as their means scores were 3.27 and 3.13 respectively.

6.3   Research question 3: What are the challenges to attainment of quality assurance in Nigerian universities?

To answer this research question, the respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on the challenges faced in the implementation of quality assurance in Nigerian universities. Result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviations of the responses to the challenges to attainment of quality assurance in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Inadequacy of various categories of learning resources/facilities	640	2.91	0.90	Accepted
2	Inadequate funding	640	2.89	0.95	Accepted
3	Employment of incompetent lecturers	640	3.08	1.15	Accepted
4	Irrelevant curriculum to the needs of the labour market	640	2.73	1.06	Accepted
5	Poor staff development programmes	640	2.89	0.99	Accepted
6	Student population explosion	640	3.00	0.96	Accepted

S/N	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
7	Weak institutional leadership to enforce compliance and sanctions	640	2.98	0.90	Accepted
8	Unstable academic calendar due to frequent strike actions	640	3.37	0.88	Accepted
9	Examination malpractice	640	3.01	0.94	Accepted
10	Poor institutional commitment and support for quality	640	2.81	1.09	Accepted
11	Poor academic preparation of the incoming students	640	3.08	1.07	Accepted
12	Poor commitment and support of academic community to quality	640	2.94	1.04	Accepted
13	Overcrowded lecture halls	640	3.10	0.82	Accepted
14	Poor teaching methods by lecturers	640	3.04	0.85	Accepted
15	Inadequate staffing	640	2.31	0.66	Rejected
16	Low integration of ICT	640	2.84	0.89	Accepted
17	Lack of awareness of quality assurance culture	640	2.88	0.87	Accepted
18	Poor curriculum delivery	640	3.16	0.95	Accepted
19	Corruption	640	3.07	0.87	Accepted
20	Poor power supply	640	3.27	0.89	Accepted
21	Inadequate office space for staff	640	2.93	0.94	Accepted
22	Absence of clear internal quality assurance policy framework	640	2.87	0.96	Accepted
	Grand Mean		2.96	0.94	Accepted

Cut off Mean = 2.50

The analysis in Table 3 indicates that inadequate staffing was not viewed by the respondents as one of the challenges to attainment of quality assurance in Nigerian universities. This was because its mean score was below the criterion mean of 2.50. However, other 21 items were regarded by the respondents as challenges to the attainment of quality assurance in Nigerian universities.

6.4   *Research question 4: What are the suggested remedies to improve quality assurance practices in Nigerian universities?*

The respondents in this study were asked to suggest remedies to improve quality assurance practices in universities. The suggestions are presented in Table 4

Table 4: Suggested remedies to improve quality assurance practices in Nigerian universities

1.	Adequate funding
2.	Strict adherence to staff- student ratio
3.	Correct staff mix
4.	Regular training of academic staff
5.	Improved staff competence through ensuring that staff acquire PhD degrees.
6.	Periodic instructional evaluation
7.	Provision of adequate quality teaching resources
8	Sufficient infrastructural facilities
9.	Adherence to students admission based on carrying capacity
10.	Admission of students should be based on merit.
11	Absence of corruption
12	Employment of staff should be based on merit.
13	Conducive learning environment
14	Genuine accreditation of academic programmes by NUC
15	Effective use of external examiner's system

From Table 4, a wide array of suggestions have been indicated by academic staff as remedies to challenges of implementation of quality assurance practices in universities.

7. Discussion of Findings

Findings of research question one revealed that quality assurance practices exist in Nigerian universities. The outcome of this study indicates that quality assurance has been mainstreamed and embedded in the system as an essential part of maintaining standard in tertiary institutions. There is in existence both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms in universities. The role of external quality assurance system is performed by the National University Commission (NUC) in Nigeria. NUC assesses the universities' operations/programmes to determine if they are meeting standards. Besides NUC, there are other professional bodies (associations) that prescribe minimum standards for their various professions. These professional bodies include; the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE), Council for Regulation of Engineering in Nigeria (COREN) for the engineers, Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and Institute of Chartered accountants in Nigeria (ICAN) and many others. All these professional bodies ensure that certificates from their various professions meet the prescribed and acceptable standards. Besides, universities have put in place their internal quality assurance mechanisms that complement the external bodies.

Findings from research question two showed that quality assurance practices are moderately implemented in universities. The findings of this study is not very encouraging because quality assurance is very important in enhancing institutional competitiveness and effectiveness. The outcome of this research is not totally surprising because necessary conditions and indicators that would have enhanced and improved quality assurance are not available in the universities. Such parameters as conducive learning environment, adequate infrastructural facilities, staff development programmes, engagement of staff on merit without ethnicity or bias, and total commitment of institutional leaders, among others. Until these variables are provided, quality assurance will continue to be a mirage. It is in this regard that Obanya (2010) maintained that quality in education does not simply happen, but it has to be sown, natured and then harvested. This brings to bear on the concept of inputs (facilities, financial resources, quality personnel) processes (institutional management, professional support for teachers) and outcome (quality). Thus, the outcomes reflect both inputs and processes.

Findings of research question three indicated that there are fundamental challenges that limit the effective and smooth implementation of quality assurance in universities. This finding supports the position of Ajodele and Abiodun-Oyebanji (2007) that underfunding, enrolment explosion, inadequate physical facilities, poor management, inadequate staffing and so on, are the major factors militating against quality assurance in Nigerian universities. This observation holds true of what is happening currently in Nigerian universities. For instance, there is serious underfunding of university education which results in incessant strike actions by various unions. Again, educational resources such as computers, books, audio visuals, library facilities, classroom/office accommodation are either in short supply, dysfunctional or out rightly not available, and irrelevant curriculum that does not address the developmental needs of the nation are still being used. Most courses taught are theoretical and irrelevant to job market requirements. There is increase in students' enrolment, thus widening the gap and creating mis-match of staff-student ratio; employment of staff is hardly done on merit. This gives rise to employment of mediocres who do not have what it takes to teach in the university system. All these are contributory factors to the lowering of quality in any university. Until these problems are corrected, quality assurance attainment will continue to be elusive in the Nigerian universities.

The findings of research question four as indicated by the respondents provide a number of suggestions that can be used to address the challenges of quality assurance implementation in universities. Apparently, the basic starting point is adequate funding because public universities in Nigeria are severely underfunded. It is generally observed that most institutions of learning operate on deficit budgets. Whereas enrolments into universities are increasing rapidly, there are serious decline in expenditures. This has affected the provision of educational facilities and other learning resources, staff salaries, promotions, training and so on. Thus, to ensure effective quality assurance

implementation, adequate funding is needed for the provision of required educational inputs. Also imperative for effective implementation of quality assurance as suggested by the respondents include; effective use of external examiners, strict adherence to staff-student ratio, regular training of academic staff, provision of teaching resources and so on.

8. Conclusion

Arising from the findings of this study, it is concluded that quality assurance practice is an integral part of the university system even though its implementation is to a moderate extent. Also, there are fundamental challenges affecting the implementation of quality assurance practice in universities. To sustain and maintain continuous quality improvement in universities require a combination of an external quality assurance mechanism together with strong internal quality assurance system that is focused on periodic audits and backed-up with adequate funding, provision of resources, as well as, good policy framework.

9. Recommendations

1. Quality assurance culture should be institutionalized whereby every personnel (academic and non - academic) are committed to its implementation. Hence quality assurance consciousness should be inculcated among members of the university community.
2. Every University must have a coherent strategy of quality assurance implementation through establishment of appropriate internal quality assurance mechanism.
3. Quality audit for self-review and improvement should be carried out by universities from time to time. The Common Wealth of Learning Review and Improvement Model (COLRIM) should be adopted. This could be conducted by individual universities or by external bodies. Such quality audit will help to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to address them, to enhance quality.
4. There is need for every university to have quality assurance document (policy framework) that will clearly spell out the do's and don'ts, as well as, the reward and punishment structure for infractions.
5. Adequate funding of education should be provided by the government because all the resources needed to enhance quality depends on funding,
6. University management should be committed to providing quality enabling environment in terms of making available the needed facilities and resources for effective service delivery towards attainment of academic excellence.

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